

## Love Poultice No. 9

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## Love Poultice No. 9

by [CigaretteInk](#)

### Summary

AU set in the days of ancient Arlathan where a young and cocky Fen'Harel saves a village healer from being mauled by a bear. Dahlia Lavellan is now in the awkward position of healing the man who saved her life, even though she has no idea who this man truly is. Short chapters, funny, and easy to follow as I'm told so if you are looking for a break from the usual Solevellan angst, (I know, I love them too!) give this a try.

# Chapter 1

She staggers along the beaten path. Her eyes were half open and still crusty from waking not an hour before the start of her excursion. She swung her empty basket back and forth around her side with each step as she lets out a jaw-straining yawn.

The dawn had just made its presence known above the mountain peaks, which meant the entire village would be awake soon enough. Which meant the villagers would find new and exciting ways to get sick, injured, or die before the sun sets.

Her biggest problem right now however was the fact she was very low on several herbs in her stores and needed to gather supplies from down the river. Her feet aching with each bare step and her eyes refusing to focus on anything but the path ahead. She was tired, starving, and just wanted to gather her herbs and soak her feet in the cool river before heading back home to her clinic.

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Fen'Harel awoke when a beam of light through the forest canopy directed its burning wrath on his eyes. He turned his head trying to find refuge in the shade but as he began to stir he realized the rock underneath his backside was more uncomfortable than the light in his face.

He sat up and found the cool clover patch he slept on that night had chilled his body more than he realized. With a small curse, he got to his feet and stretched his body until he heard the relaxing pops in his spine give way to relief.

His clothes felt damp from lying in the clover, but within a few minutes his body heat managed to dry them as he walked towards a shallow creek not too far from where he lay. The thought of washing his face and drinking from the cool water made him realize how thirsty he actually was.

He arrived at the creek and unbuckled his heavy fur jacket, exposing the woolen undershirt as he knelt besides the creek. Hiking up his long sleeves and cupping the water in his hands, he drank in the cool liquid slowly.

He sat back after washing his face and hands in the creek and tried to find order in his hair as he pulled each lock and tangle out before securing the hair in a band. He sat for a few moments more; staring at the small minnows in the water before what sounded like a distant voice pierced the tranquility of the scene.

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"Bastard!" She yelled, clutching her right foot in her palm as she tried to maintain her balance and pick out the offending acorn husk from the arch in her foot.

The blood from the small wound had begun to travel up her leg and onto her stockings as she held her foot up in a stupid attempt to stop the bleeding. Now she was mad. Getting the blood stains out of her clothes was hard enough. However, trying to get it out of something sheer without ripping them? All she could do was stare at all the half broken acorns scattered around her feet in white frothing anger as she applied pressure to the wound.

After a moment she decided that she was considerably more awake now than before and decided to let the acorn win this round.

'That's silly, Dahlia.' She thought to herself. 'You should have just sent Jun to market yesterday for

these herbs. This is what you get for being lazy.' With this new cut in a very uncomfortable place, the cool water in the river seemed more enticing.

She continued her walk a bit more slowly than before until she finally met the river. The water was clear and cold as she pulled up the multiple layers of thin fabric from her skirt and secured them in a knot on the right side of her belt. With the movement of the cool water helping to clean the cut on her foot she brought the basket with her into the knee-high water and began to look for the plants she needed.

She slowly began to walk up and down the river side picking the various roots and leaves she needed when she heard a loud bellow from what was no doubt a very large animal.

She stood as still as she could, bent above a spindleweed bush with the leaves still in hand and her eyes wide and focused on nothing but the plant before her. After a moment she gathered up the courage to move her head towards the direction of what made that incredible sound.

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He stood up from his seat and craned his head in the direction of the noise. 'Perhaps it was just a bear,' he thought to himself. He had little to fear from the woodland beasts, great or small, since most gave him a wide berth due to fear and uncertainty.

He would sometimes walk the forests in the form of a great wolf for the sheer joy of viewing, walking, and smelling the natural world in the form of a beast. He could smell what no man or elf could, ran faster than any beast, and it was this ability that made him feel so powerful and unique compared to his elvhen kin, even the pantheon.

Here in these woods, he was king in his domain.

Then he heard the shrillest scream he ever heard and he began running towards the noise without a second thought. He called upon the beast within him and from a cloud of smoke he became the great wolf of legend. His large paws beat the ground with purpose as he knew someone was in need of his help and they needed him now.

"A bear!" She screamed, more to herself than to anyone else who could actually hear her.

"It's a damned bear! This is how I'm going to die?!" she said in between heavy breaths. She looked behind her briefly to see the bear galloping behind her at an unfathomable speed. The cut in her foot was no longer an issue, the adrenaline saw to that, but even still the shakiness in her legs from the rush saw that her efforts of escape were ineffective.

Her legs gave way underneath her and she fell flat on the rocky path before her. She spun around quickly to see the bear stop before her and bellow out one more blood-curdling noise as it rose its powerful claws in what she would assume would be the equivalent of tossing a doll around a room. She closed her eyes and waited for the painful blow.

But it did not come.

Instead she heard the bear let out another horrible roar and she could feel the small tremors through the ground. She shrieked and tried pulling herself up off the ground in one final attempt at fleeing, but her legs would hardly cooperate. She curled on the ground away from the noise and as she opened her eyes she saw a strange sight before her.

A wolf, almost as big as the bear itself, had it by the throat. The bear reared up on its back legs, trying to gain some force as he stomped back down in hopes the wolf would let go. The white pelt

of the wolf was beginning to stain red with blood when finally the wolf was thrown from the bear in one last stomp.

She watched as the bear no longer took interest in her and began to battle the more aggressive adversary. She watched them go back and forth for a while before she began to realize, 'to the victor go the spoils.' Her eyes grew at the thought that this wolf was going to probably eat her instead and is just battling the bear for the right. Was it starving? Would it just eat the bear? Do wolves eat bears? Would they want to? Curiosity overcame her need to flee, and as she saw the wolf take hit after hit from the powerful claws of the bear she felt bad for the poor thing.

Both beasts were winded, but the wolf had caught the bear off guard in the beginning and managed to rip into the side of its neck, letting blood gush all around. But the wolf had taken the brutal strength of the bear's hits all across its body, the whine from the wolf when the bear caught him on the head and forced him into the ground made her sad for the poor creature.

Her magic was weak. There was no way she could take out a bear, 'but perhaps I don't have to.' She thought. The bear was weak and no doubt afraid; perhaps she could scare it away.

The bear tried putting all its weight onto the paw that held the wolf by the head and at that moment Fen'Harel began to see his vision fading. 'Killed by a bear; I should have returned to my form earlier.' But to return to his elven form now would no doubt kill him underneath the bear's weight. He felt himself fade more and more until the sudden relief of pressure left his head. He couldn't see much but the bear seemed to be in a panic. A bright orange glow leapt off the bear's pelt and sent it hopping and thrashing in a fury as it tried desperately to extinguish the flames from its back.

It had taken all her concentration to make that little flame, but the fur on the bear quickly caught fire and the more the bear thrashed, the more blood it spilt from the gushing wound on its neck.

After a few minutes the fire died.

The bear exhausted and bloody walked away from the path back into the woods. There was no doubt in her mind the bear would not survive, but she did not have the strength or courage to get close enough to the bear to end its misery.

She looked back at the wolf, beaten and battered on its side, just barely awake. And she felt sadness for the creature. While it probably was just trying to find a quick meal off her, she felt it had actually saved her instead.

She crawled closer to the wolf, its eyes watching her but made no attempt to protect itself like any injured animal would. She knelt next to it and pulled her long, white hair back behind her shoulders and began petting the wolf like it was just a sleeping puppy.

Fen'Harel could barely make out what was happening. He felt each nerve on his body screaming for help, and she was going to pet him? He was tired. He was injured. All he wanted to do was fall asleep and hoped that when he awoke he would be back in the clover patch.

He fell unconscious. Without a mindful effort to maintain his form, in a puff of smoke he returned to his original form.

Dahlia jumped to her feet. What was once a large white wolf now became a man! She stood over him for a second and began to look warily in each direction for some explanation to this craziness.

"What the fuck!"

## Chapter 2

"Oh no. Oh no."

She began running back and forth while in her head she tried to both understand what had just happened and what she should do next. The man had fallen unconscious and needed medical attention, obviously, but she had no way of getting him back to her clinic like this.

The pool of blood coming from his head spoke of urgency and she needed to get that blood to stop, or stifle it enough where she could go get help. Head wounds tend to bleed the worst and she had little on her as far as aid supplies to help put a cork on that wound.

She grabbed a fist full of her skirt and ripped it down her leg, exposing her blood covered stocking from before this mess and began to bundle it up into what would be a decent absorbent pad. Now she needed something to secure it with. She didn't like the idea of shredding her clothes further and running through town, but she remembered that soiled stocking could have one last purpose before she threw it away.

She unfastened the tops of the stocking from her garter belt and rolled it down to her ankle, she then slipped the ring that held the stocking to her foot off her toe and slid it off her leg. She stretched the fabric to its full length and began to work immediately on the man's wound.

The lace trim of the stocking was gently tucked underneath the wrap, for dignity's sake, and now she felt she could sprint off for help with one less thing to worry about.

She burst from the wood-line and began sprinting towards the town, but then she took a quick turn before approaching the gates and began to run parallel to the village. The posted guards just watched her run by.

'I can't go into town! They'll make me explain this shit!' She thought as she ran from the inner village line towards the farming community. She bound over the low fences and ran through the crop fields; a farmer or two waved as she leapt by, clearly intrigued by her running but not enough to try and stop her.

She burst from the fields and dirt road towards her clinic which sat on a small hill overlooking the farm lands. As she reached the building she ran around back towards the horse stable where she kept the horse buggy for emergencies. There she saw the stable aid, Yanos, cleaning out the stable like every morning.

"Hey there Lady Lavellan, you look awful." He said as though that was something he said every morning.

"I need Naug'seus! Get the buggy on him!" She yelled while trying to catch her breath. She pointed towards the horse as if to show that there was no time to start asking questions; she placed her hands on her knees and tried to calm down.

He grabbed the lead rope and hooked it around the horse's neck and led him with a strong arm towards the small buggy. He secured the harnesses and led him back to Dahlia who was now holding the stitch in her side, face flustered and hair disheveled. This was a lot of running to do before breakfast.

She gathered the reins and before Yanos could offer any further help, she had the horse running out the clinic gates and down the road.

When she finally got to where the man lay she saw the makeshift bandage was already soaked through and useless. She tried picking up the man by slinging his body over her back and dragging him into the cart, but he was incredibly heavy for her small frame. The first time she tried his dead weight had forced her into the ground underneath him. Maybe she should have let Yanos come with her.

After a few more attempts that only managed to hurt her in the process, she got his limp body into the back of the buggy and took off towards her clinic.

Quick jerks and bumpy roads did nothing to help his condition, she was sure. When she finally entered the gated archway to her home she positioned the buggy outside the front doors and ran back to the stables to see if Yanos was able to help her get this man upstairs into her spare room.

The clinic did not house patients, anything that required bed rest was treated at their home. However, she had no idea where this man called home and so she was left with no choice but for her home to play hospital until his recovery.

But Yanos was no where to be found.

She yelled for him inside the clinic and out and still no answer. With a sickness in her stomach she ran through her house and opened every door leading to the spare room and returned to the buggy to try and heave the man upstairs.

What a joke.

Getting him off the buggy was the easy part, but now she felt as though she were a turtle with a really heavy shell. She was on her hands and knees trying to get this man up stairs without losing her balance or having him accidentally slide off her shoulders and roll down the stairs.

The pain in her knees and shoulders were nothing compared to the exhaustion she felt as she managed to carry a man who felt like twice her weight into a spare bed on the second floor of her home.

After getting him into the bed she collapsed on the floor in an effort to catch her breath when she heard the loud singsong voice of her chipper assistant calling after her in the vestibule.

Jun-Bug, as Dahlia calls her, became her assistant a few years ago after she realized she needed the help when she became the primary healer to the whole village after the death of her mentor. Jun came from a family of healers and was actually a very competent one, if she could focus on her work instead of whatever she latched onto that week.

"Dolly!" The girl hits octaves not suitable for elvhen ears to withstand.

Dahlia had to literally peel her face off the floor before rolling over onto her back to answer the girl.

"I'm upstairs with a man!"

She heard what can only be akin to shriek of a fruit bat. She immediately realized the poor choice of words as she attempted to lift her body up off the cold floor and remembered the urgency of the situation.

With a gasp she ran out the door and down the hall towards her supply closet as she yelled back at the young lady who remained a giddy mess down below.

"Not what you're thinking!" She yelled downstairs as she was grabbing bandages and salves from her closet before rushing back to the bedroom.

"Lead Naug'seus out to the stable and see if Yanos is back! I need you here in the clinic so come right back!" As she yelled she saw the man scrunch up his nose at the sudden volume of her voice.

She took off the makeshift bandage and saw her hands become instantly saturated with blood. She was coasting on the edge of her adrenaline rush as she placed a thick absorbent pad over his wound and left his side briefly to the other side of the room where a wash basin and water pump resided.

Getting a bowl of water she thought to warm it with magic, but realized that her magic would be better used to try and heal the wound instead. Dipping the wash cloth in water she removed the pad and quickly started to clean the wound before the blood pooled again.

Now for the exhausting part.

Dahlia was not a very powerful mage when it came to offensive attacks and such, but her magical talents in healing and support were very good. However, the amount of concentration and continuous use would leave her exhausted if pressed for too long so she had become very aware of mana exhaustion.

As she lifted the pad up she applied a controlled burst of magic to the wound and could see it begin to heal slightly before replacing the pad and resting for a moment. She worked on this one wound for roughly ten minutes before she was convinced the wound would no longer bleed and finally scab over. Now it was time to see what other wounds needed assistance.

She managed to shrug off his thick jacket down to his shirt which had clearly become attached to him as it saturated his torso with blood. She took a pair of scissors from the table and cut the shirt off to reveal several lacerations and some slight discoloration in the ribs. These wounds were upset after the removal of the cloth and began to bleed again. Repeating the process she managed to clean and stifle those wounds as well before she suspected a few ribs were fractured.

She pulled a small tuning fork from her kit and hit it on the bedside table. She placed her ear on the man's chest around the suspected area and placed the vibrating fork on the rib she thought would be fractured. She did this several times before coming to the conclusion that he could possibly have a few injured ribs.

Now that the wounds were sufficiently cleaned she decided to change the water and begin cleaning all the blood off his body before applying the salves and bandages.

She removed his boots and attempted to undo his belt buckle when a hand reached out and snatched her wrist in a painful grip. She looked up at the angry, pain-ridden face of her patient.

His teeth gritted in pain as he attempted to sit up in the small bed, still gripping her wrist in what felt like a vise.

"What are you doing?"

## Chapter 3

"Taking off your... pants?" She cocked an eyebrow in confusion. Was it not obvious she was trying to help? With both hands still securely fastened to the belt buckle on his trousers he tried pulling her hands free of him yet the resistance and death grip she had on his belt were all he met.

"Let go of me woman!" he snarled at her, but still she kept her hands firmly in place. "Just what are you trying to do?!"

"I'm trying to help heal you, you weird looking bastard!" Now it was a fight. She was pressing her shoulder into his chest trying to get him to lie back down on the bed as she unfastened his trousers. With what little strength he had in his body he tried to force her off him, but her shoulder was digging right into the very tender spot on his chest.

"I don't need help from some unwashed, filthy backwoods healer." He snapped.

It now became apparent to her exactly how dirty she really was. Her clothes were torn from earlier and stained with a combination of blood and dirt. Her face stained brown and mud was still caked on her feet and legs from the river; not to mention she only had one filthy stocking on. Her hair was matted with his dried blood after trying to heave his bleeding, broken body around most of the morning on her back; she quickly sat up and let go of his belt, fully aware of her personal state. 'Cleanliness is what most people expected from a healer,' she thought.

He sighed as he held a hand to the sore spot on his chest and began to survey the room.

He lay on a small, red-stained bed in a small room; no doubt the linens were ruined from his blood. On one side there was a water pump with a decorative handle coming from a pillar about waist high and underneath the spout a shorter, marble pillar stood which was meant to hold the basin while you pump. An unattractive dresser stood underneath a small open window and in the corner there was a full length vanity mirror which did not match anything in the room. In fact every piece of furniture in this room was mismatched and looked as though each were broken at some point and shoddily repaired.

His face fell in exasperation at such a display of interior mayhem. He looked back at the filthy woman who had no doubt caught on to where his judgmental gazes lay. She rolled her eyes and tried to bunch her hair back behind her head in a messy knot before trying to resume her treatment.

"It's a spare bedroom. Like I want you bleeding all over my good things."

He looked down at himself and realized the extent of his injuries, not to mention the incredible pain shooting through his head with each heart beat he could hear in his skull.

"Where am I?" He said as he lay back, gripping his head by pressing his palms against his temples, desperately trying to calm his headache.

"You are in my home, which is also my clinic. And right now I have to look you over and bandage you up because there is a rabid, red-headed woman downstairs playing healer with Creators knows who and how. You will not be my sole focus today, now get your pants off!" She was feeling urgent now that she realized Jun was probably downstairs trying to heal injuries with soup. Mythall bless her.

Fen'Harel, still applying pressure to his head had finally had enough. With a frustrated growl he whipped his hands down to his belt and hastily jerked his pants down his legs until an incredible



pain shot up his leg and into his thigh.

Watching him writhe in pain as soon as he tried to jerk the trousers off his leg told her he probably had a break somewhere.

"Lay still." She commanded, completely unamused with the fact that she was probably going to have to set a break in a very hot-tempered patient.

His pants were pulled down to his knees and thankfully he wore some small-clothes underneath. She carefully pulled on the bottom of the pant leg until they were completely off and saw the awful twist and swelling present on his leg.

"Get comfy. I'll be back." She got up and left the bedroom for the supply closet once more. She got what looked like linen belts and flat yew rods as stints. She then went down stairs and walked through the door to what was essentially the clinic side of her home. There she saw Jun looking over a small, sick child sitting in the lap of her mother. Jun, looking up and after seeing Dahlia, had developed a huge grin paired with wide green eyes.

"What happened to you?" she said with a low chuckle.

"I fought a bear." She said, walking to the back room where she stored and mixed her medicinal herbs into salves, elixirs, and poultices. She opened the desk and found a small satchel of money, stepped out briefly into the waiting area, and threw it at Jun, hitting her in the back. She pulled out a parchment paper and wrote down a list of herbs and the quantities she needed. She then pulled three vials of a premade elixir from her cabinet and came back into the waiting room.

"You don't need to throw things." Jun claimed, her beaming smile from before no longer present.

"Take that satchel and this letter and give it to Yanos when you're done here."

With elixirs and supplies in hand she began her trek back upstairs to what would probably be the best part of this man's day.

She opened the door to see the man laying on his back, gloss-eyed and still gripping his head in pain. Clear turmoil was written on his face as he tried to decide which pain to give preference to.

She walked up to the bed and laid the items next to his misshapen leg. She then placed the three vials filled with a dark green liquid on the bedside table. Taking one of the vials in hand she uncorked the top and handed it to the man. "Drink this."

He was not going to question her at this time, it seemed like just talking sent painful vibrations through his head. So with a deep breath and a quick swig he drank the foul liquid.

She was preparing the area around his leg and began sliding the linen belts underneath the broken leg as gently as she could. She could practically feel the air around him relax as the elixir calmed and numbed his body. 'He's still going to feel this, but at least he'll be too weak to do anything about it.' She sometimes felt like her patients may try to hit her when she has to set a break, so she began making these elixirs a bit more potent than most healers would recommend.

She was going to have to use what she considered 'an invisible hand' to grab the bones in his leg and set them right. She began to concentrate and close her eyes as she attempted to feel for the breaks with what can only be described as a magical sense. Fen'Harel could feel the hold she had on his leg and began to tense at the pressure he felt. The elixir managed to quell his pain mostly, but he could still feel the hot pain as she attempted to grasp the bones. He bunched the bed fabric in his fists, closed his eyes, and lifted his head up with a painful grimace on his face.

And with a sickening crack, she set the bones back in their proper place.

The yell he gave was loud enough to startle the horses and birds roosting in the stables. From this room she could hear the horses stomp and whinny with surprise at the painful howl of the man. And with deft fingers she began putting the stints in place and fastening them to his calf using the linen belts. She looked up at the man to see he was laying flat on the bed, face red, with a hand covering his eyes in what looked like a mix of agonizing pain and relief.

Once she finished securing the braces she grabbed a thick pillow from under the bed and propped it underneath his leg for some elevation.

After a quick look for any other injuries she threw the dirty water from the wash basin out the window and began to fill it with fresh water from the pump again. She returned to his bedside with a small cloth only to see he had not moved or adjusted himself since last she checked.

She made a spot on the bedside table and gently placed the basin down as she sat down on a small stool next to him.

"Do you want help washing this blood off? Or are you going to be a big boy?" She held out the clean cloth for him to take. He lifted his hand from his eyes and snatched the cloth out of her hand, refusing to look into her face.

"You going to watch me to make sure I do a good job?" He sneered with a tired and grumpy look on his face.

"Keep talking like that and I put the leeches on you." She stood up and left him to clean himself in peace. She walked down stairs and started heading towards the kitchen in the back. She picked up a heavy cast iron pot and filled it with water before returning it to the fire place. The fire died out long ago and so she grabbed some nearby fire wood and used some flint and steel to renew the blaze. She then diced up some old vegetables she had from the pantry and found a few druffalo tail bones and raked them into the pot before replacing the heavy lid back on top.

She walked back out and poked her head into her clinic to see if Jun needed any help. Inside she saw the room was empty, aside from the back half of the red-haired little elf hanging out her window. She approached quietly to see what Jun was doing to warrant this behavior before a patient walked in to see this. She could hear her giggling and fidgeting with someone outside and she managed to peak over Jun to see Yanos playfully trying to pull her out the window. Both laughing and playing until Dahlia caught eyes with Yanos in an expressionless stare. She lifted Jun's legs and threw her out the window into Yanos' arms, much to their surprise as both fell to the ground and looked back up at Dahlia in the window, both still grinning like school children.

"You're both fired." And with that she closed the window.

With a giggle Jun stood up and yelled back, "See you tomorrow Dolly!"

## Chapter 4

She walked out of the now empty room and peeked her head in the kitchen to see if the food was cooking well. After a few adjustments in seasoning, she left the pot to finish cooking and started making her way back up the stairs to her bedroom.

She walked past the guestroom and felt that if he was in need of a bath, she could use a one herself. 'By the time I'm done the food should be ready.' She walked further down the small hallway and opened the door to the master bedroom.

Once inside she immediately went over to the large bathtub in the corner and began using the attached pump to fill the tub. After filling the tub halfway she began drawing the curtains to the window as well as the curtain around the balcony door. The sun was beginning to set, coloring the sky in a nice violet hue. She lit some candles around her room to make up for the lack of light with the curtains drawn and began shedding her filthy clothes and placing them in a wicker laundry basket she had placed next to her door. She placed her hands in the water and after a few seconds of magic application the water temperature raised to a tolerable lukewarm state. She climbed into the tub and was immediately disgusted with the sudden color change in the water.

She unfastened her hair and dunked her head underneath the water in hopes of breaking-up all the dried blood from her hair. When she felt her hair was sufficiently washed she rung out all the water she could and twisted the entire length of hair into a lazy bun before securing it to her head. She resumed washing her face and body until all evidence of today's struggle had disappeared from her skin. Standing up and once again marveling at the discolored water, she stepped out of the tub onto a fur mat and pulled up a cork to let the drain take the nasty liquid from her room through a pipe and into the garden outside.

She used a towel to dry herself before walking over to her vanity and taking a large wool puff from a powder dish and dusting her entire body in the fine crush. She put on her sleep dress and used a white robe to mask it as she left her room for the kitchen.

As she entered the room the smell of the stew and the hot moisture in the air was substantial. She used a thick cloth and removed the heavy pot from the fire and placed it on the thick wooden table. She grabbed bowls and utensils from her cabinets and set up a tray of food and a jug of water for the man. She ate her meal there in the kitchen and once finished she grabbed the tray and after adding a pinch of spice from a clay jar to the stew, began the slow walk back upstairs to her reluctant patient.

She opened the door to see the man had managed to magically light the candles in the darkened room and pull the soiled sheets from underneath him only to leave them in a heap on the floor next to the bed. He looked up at her in a visibly disgruntled mood, arms crossed lazily over his chest as though he had been kept waiting for her return for hours.

"Those sheets were filthy." He claimed with an authoritative voice.

"Oh forgive me. Can't imagine how that happened." She spat with such sarcasm that it made her feel like some nagging housewife.

She placed the tray in front of the window on the dresser as she reached over to close window and bring the stool closer to his bedside. She saw he had done a fine job of cleaning the blood and dirt from his body so now she needed to apply the salves and bandages to the wounds before calling it a night.

She grabbed a small cloth and unfastened the lid to the healing salve before dipping the cloth inside and rubbing the wounds on his chest. The salve stung for a moment, but soon the wounds were numb and he began to watch her suspiciously. He did not believe she would do anything harmful to him, but her motivations and attitude were something he couldn't piece together.

"Do you know who I am?" He asked, eyes narrow and focused as though he were studying her face for truth in her words.

"You're the wolf-man who tried to save me from a bear." She said in a flat tone.

"That's all?" He asked.

"You're the ungrateful wolf-man who tried to save me from a bear?" She raised an eyebrow, yet still focusing on salving his wounds.

He rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. "Does that not bother you? To have a wolf-man you don't know in your home?"

"Why? Are you going to start rubbing your butt on my carpet?" She looked up with a sarcastic stare painted on her face.

He curled the edge of his lip in an annoyed sneer and turned his head from her direction.

"I don't care who you are just as long as I don't wake up to find fleas in my house. I'll try and treat you well until you're able to leave." With that she finished her work with the chest wounds. Now she turned her focus on his head.

The wound above his brow was deep; no doubt one of the claws from the bear had found purchase there in the thin flesh. She pulled the lit candle on the bedside table closer and used her hands to physically turn his head towards the light in order to see the injury.

"That's going to scar."

"Well, whose fault is that?" He whispered.

"You know what?" She said before digging her finger into the bruise on his ribs, making him squirm away from her assault.

"I don't recall yelling out to some stray wolf to save my ass!"

"No, I guess you were too busy curled up in a pathetic heap on the ground to do much else!" He grabbed her wrist and pulled her finger from his ribcage and sighed in relief as the pain receded.

She took some offense to the comment, but he was right. She felt a little embarrassed that she didn't put up as much of a fight until after the bear was smashing his face into the ground. Truth be told, she felt guilty for his injuries and figured the only way to make it up to him was to help him recover in relative comfort. However, with each passing comment between them she was finding it more difficult to keep her promise of comfort when she really just wanted to do her job in peace.

"The more you cooperate with me, the faster your recovery." She said in her best try to make peace voice. "Just let me make up for getting you hurt."

He liked the idea of recovering quickly and leaving this town as just a memory, but he had the strangest feeling she truly had no idea who he was. 'Should I tell her?' he thought. 'If an enemy were to find me incapacitated here...' he figured that since this town was so far away from Arlathan

that most the people would never recognize him. But that did not mean that there wouldn't be a few who would.

"Fine." He said. "But I would prefer if no one see me here."

"Some how I can't imagine very many friends lining up to inquire." She gathered her used materials and placed all the dirty linen and his clothes in a pile and tossed them down the hall. She returned to help prop him up before giving him his dinner. She left down the hall to retrieve some fresh blankets from the storage closet.

He looked down at the meal before him. A bowl of stew, a small bunch of grapes that were lightly sprinkled with sugar, and a slice of bread. He made note of the large pitcher of water and small glass on his bedside table along with the remaining two vials of the foul tasting elixir from before.

"You are going to need to drink a lot of water and you can have one of those vials before bed if you need help sleeping." She returned with two blankets and placed them on the bed. She left the stool next to the bed so he could put the tray there when he was done and began draping the blankets carefully over his broken leg. With that, she looked around and blew out the candles on the distant side of the room, leaving the one on his bedside lit.

"I'll see you in the morning. If you wake up in pain you can take that last vial." And with that she left down the hall to her bedroom.

Fen'Harel just shook his head slightly at the woman and started to spoon the stew around the bowl before bringing it up to his lips. As soon as he swallowed the spoonful he was suddenly aware of the painful spiciness of the dish. He grabbed the water glass and drank the warm liquid greedily. With a huff he looked down at the stew and back at the large pitcher.

"That's one way to ensure you drink plenty of water."

## Chapter 5

By the time she left his room the sun had already set. The darkness of the hallway was lit only by the moonlight seeping through the window at the end of the hall. She looked down and gathered up all the soiled laundry and deposited them into a small water closet across from the master bedroom. Leaving the piles of laundry to be washed tomorrow, she walked back into her bedroom and began opening the curtains once more to let the moonlight in before extinguishing her candles.

Shrugging off her robe she walked over to her messy bed full of pillows and blankets and flopped into the heap. As she lay there she prayed silently, hoping the morning sun would be enough to wake her tomorrow. With that last thought she slipped effortlessly into the fade.

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The morning sun rays found their way across her face and with a heavy sigh she rolled out of bed and crawled her way to the vanity. In the mirror she found her reflection to resemble something of a wild snow beast. Long white hairs found knots and kinks during her sleep that made her almost balk at the thought of trying to put a comb through it.

She bunched up all her hair into her lap and with a thick comb in hand began to work out the tangles carefully at the bottom while progressively moving up towards her scalp. Once finished she threw her hair back over her shoulder and began the process of applying her makeup. After a few minutes of picking out a new dress and trying to find a matching pair of stockings, she decided it was time to grace the world with her chipper self and make some breakfast for her and her guest.

The fire in the kitchen had died out hours ago and with little fire wood left to make a substantial blaze she decided diced fruits with bread and jam would be acceptable for this morning. After preparing a plate she left the food on the table and walked into her clinic to her medicine room in the back. On her desk lay several small bags of what were no doubt the herbs she sent Yanos for yesterday and a small note with two gold pieces weighing down the parchment. She was going to have to talk to the herb vendor about his prices again, there should have been more change left over.

Putting the herbs in their labeled pots on the shelves she began working on mixing several new concoctions to supplement what she used yesterday. Once finished she reached for a few vials of blue liquid and place them carefully in her belt. With the new mixes and her own personal stash secure she made her way back into the kitchen, grabbed the plate of sliced fruit and walked back upstairs.

She tapped the door a few times and waited for a response. "Come in." The man called to her. She opened the door slowly and shut it quietly behind her, giving a quiet, halfhearted 'good morning' as she made her way to his bedside. Gathering all the used vials on the bedside table and placing them on last night's tray, she placed the fruit plate next to him. After placing the used tray on the dresser and opening the window to let the room breathe, she sat down gently on the side of the bed and pulled the blanket up to expose his fractured leg.

As she began poking and feeling his leg he took notice that the woman he saw yesterday and the woman before him could have passed for two different women. 'I suppose a full night of sleep and a bath can have a positive affect on people.' That thought quickly dispersed when she found the pain button on his leg.

Making note of the area she pulled one of the blue vials from her belt and drank the contents

within. She waited a moment for the elixir to take affect and began applying controlled burst of magic directly to the break. With her back towards him she worked in silence, placing all of her concentration on his injury.

He watched her work for a while before finding the act of healing boring and uneventful. His mind started to wander around the room when his attention began focusing on her hair. Her hair pooled on the bed behind her and it made him think of a frozen waterfall. He inconspicuously grabbed a small lock of it and began rolling it back and forth between his fingers liking the feel to soft silken threads. She stopped after a few moments to rest; her breathing had become slightly labored in this healing endeavor. She decided to take this moment and see how his more superficial wounds were healing. Turning to face him he let go of the strands so as not to alert her of what he was doing and sat up straight for her to inspect.

As she worked on examining the wounds on his torso, his mind was beginning to compare the woman now to the one before. Her clothes and hair were clean and she had a scent that was hard to place. Or perhaps several different scents. He could smell something like foliage and earth on her hands, perhaps she gardened? No. This was not the smell of vegetables or flowers, this was more medicinal. 'She mixes the potions herself, no doubt.' But there was another smell that was more pleasing that he couldn't figure out. Was it perfume? Not quite. It smelt mild and fresh; very subtle.

Catching a glimpse of his face as she worked she noticed he had what can only be viewed as intense concentration on her body.

"Am I hurting you?" Trying to break the silence and discomfort at such a judgmental gaze. He refocused his concentration before realizing he had been staring at what would look like her breasts from any other position.

"Just trying to place your smell."

"My...smell?" she turned her head to one shoulder and tried to take a deep whiff of herself.

"You probably smell my powder. I hope."

"I also smell something like smoke on your clothes?" his eyes narrowed at new smell.

She turned her head away and sighed. "My apprentice thought I should give up smoking since I was taking frequent breaks away from our patients. She stole my pipe and paid off the vendors so I can't buy my fire leaf anywhere." The fact that her clothes had still managed to retain the smell of her habit was a bit alarming. Jun may decide to search her home for any evidence of her possibly hoarding another pipe.

"I suppose I can now understand your temper." He said, watching as her gaze narrowed at the slight attack on her character.

"Besides," he tried spinning a more positive note on his previous comment, "I think the powder would be more suited." Her gaze did not soften.

He felt as though he were trying to win a losing battle with these compliments. He wasn't trying to offend her, she did seem genuinely concerned about his injuries and trying to heal him, but he knew that if he began to talk sweet and charm her like most other women she may try and find ways to make his treatment more torturous.

"It just seems like a nicer smell for you to have," he began, "You're a very pretty woman."

"You're a pretty woman." She echoed back at him, her face had slowly relaxed the more he tried to

dig himself up from this hole. She almost felt bad for making him redact his comments to this point, but she felt that part of her short temper was mostly due to her forced circumstances and gave him the benefit of the doubt.

From downstairs they could both hear the front door open then close before the high-pitched voice of Jun reverberated throughout the house.

"Dolly! I brought some tiny sweet cakes from the baker! They're fresh!"

"I'll be down in a moment. Why don't you put those in the kitchen and tell Yanos I'll need more firewood before he leaves today."

"Don't forget its payday too!" she rang with such enthusiasm that Dahlia just pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration.

"I forgot about the pay..." she whispered to herself. She stood up from the edge of her bed and grabbed the tray off the dresser and began walking towards the door.

"Take half the contents of that green bottle only if you start hurting. I'll bring up some books for you later." And with that she left him to eat his breakfast.

He chuckled quietly to himself when he felt she was a safe distance away from his door.

"You're a pretty woman?"



## Chapter 6

The next few days were fairly uneventful for Fen'Harel. To play down his identity he simply insisted on being called Fen, much to her annoyance. She knew she couldn't pry out the truth from him and simply let him have his secrets. While this woman, whose name was Dahlia and not Dolly as he was harshly reminded, had begun making frequent check on him and his injuries more and more as the days went on.

"I would much rather be doing this than tending to the people of my own village." She said while replacing the braces on his leg with something more comfortable yet sturdy.

"Why is that if you don't mind me asking?"

"Someone in our tavern has managed to pass a cute little bug onto some of their patrons, who in turn has passed it on to a few other people." She shuttered at the thought of how such a sickness had spread so quickly and with such disgusting results.

"A bug?" He asked warily at where this line of discussion would lead him.

"The kind that makes you develop an awful rash...in tender areas." She shuttered once more, she had already treated two cases today. It was only when she saw another man come into her clinic with the telltale, bowlegged walk that she excused herself to tend to her wounded friend upstairs, leaving Jun to learn about the more disgusting aspects of this job up close. It was almost fun to do this to Jun and her patient since she was just so adorable that most with more embarrassing ailments would insist upon having her look at their wounds instead of having cute, bubbly Jun cast judgment on them. Especially if their sicknesses came from unsavory places.

"You left your assistant to tend to these people alone?" he wasn't sure if he should find the whole prospect humorous or whether he should lecture her on being so casual with her charges.

"I know it looks bad on my part, but to be honest she is better suited for this line of work than I am." He could practically see the resentment in her eyes as she finished wrapping his leg in a thick binding. "She is far more compassionate than I had ever been in my life, and that's what people want from their healer, right? That and she has already surpassed me in skill. The only reason she even still considers me a mentor is because she knows she is young and her mind wanders all the time."

"Do you resent her?" he couldn't quite understand what he was feeling from her. Was it jealousy? Perhaps she didn't quite know herself. Her brow creased for asking such a bold question.

"I am truly jealous of any man or woman who can conjure magic continuously without feeling weak and breathless. But of Jun? When she can begin to focus on her tasks more seriously she will take over this clinic and I'll probably retire." Her face relax at the thought of retirement in just a few short years. She wanted that more than anything.

"Maybe I should have your Jun heal my wounds instead." He teased her.

"That would be the last thing you would want." Her gaze was mellow, slowly working the bindings on his leg with carefully slow movements.

"Why would that be?" he smiled. He had come to appreciate her strange brand of wit and discontent over the past few days, and ever since she found his pipe and leaf satchel stashed in his coat she liked to be around him in the hopes he would let her have at least one drag before

returning to work, and he was willing to oblige in return for some company to change up dull scenery of the tiny room.

She sighed with slight embarrassment, "Because you are a cocky bastard. But you're a good-looking, cocky bastard. She would personally sabotage your health in an effort to keep you here longer."

"If she's as cute as you say, I could think of worse punishments." He mused at her with a playful smile.

"How about I send her up here then? First thing she'll want to do is bathe you." She got up from her seat and began walking towards the door. "Jun!"

"No! Wait!" He began to feel frantic as he sat up quickly making a grab for her. She managed to keep his existence here a secret so far, but a young girl may be more prone to gossip. He made an attempt to reach for her before he lost his balance and tumbled from the bed with a heavy thump.

"Jun!" She called again, eyes fixed on the door as though she did not hear him topple.

"Yes?!" He heard the loud playful voice coming from the vestibule. There was a dull pain traveling through his leg as well as in his chest after the sudden collision with the hard floor, but he made one last feeble attempt to grab her wrist. But before he could snatch her hand she took a few steps forward and opened the door.

"What do you want from me woman?" he said; he could see her body shudder with silent laughter before calling back to Jun.

"Stir the pot in the kitchen for me would you?" After a tiny confirmation was heard she closed the door and looked at the heap of man and blankets on the floor before her.

He let out a heavy sigh, letting his head hit the floor in exasperation. Using the bedside table as a brace he pull himself back up into the bed and sat there with his head low trying to regain a bit of his composure.

"You're lucky you have pants on, I would have almost preferred her to find you here in your underclothes. Teach you to make fun of me..." She gathered up the blankets and threw them back on the bed. "Now, try and walk around a little."

He sat there for a few moments, stewing in his embarrassment and annoyance before standing up from his bed and placing a little weight on his leg to test the brace.

"How does that feel?" she asked.

"Some pain," he began, "but I don't feel stable enough to walk yet."

"I'll see if I can find a crutch somewhere, but you are going to need to stand on it like this a few times every day. We can't let your legs atrophy."

He sat back down on the edge of the bed and watched her carefully open the window and look down below, as though searching for something.

"Yanos!" She called after whom he understood was her stable hand. "Please check out in the shed for a crutch would you?"

He did not like the idea of hobbling around on a crutch, but at the same time it could help him gain

a little freedom from the confines of his bed, or this room for that matter. He liked the idea and sat up in attention when she pulled herself away from the window ledge.

"I'm going into town to a few hours, do you need anything?" she inquired.

"How about a few new books? I've already read everything you have."

"Any particular subject? I'll see if they have anything, but be mindful that our book depository doesn't hold very many subjects." She said as she smoothed out the wrinkles on her dress.

"Anything about dreams or the fade would be best." He reclined back into his propped position on the bed, grabbing a book from the stack on the table.

Watching him reread a book on local myth made her wonder about the man. She grabbed a long hooded shawl she had draped over the bedpost and lazily braided her hair forward to prevent the wind from blowing it into a large tangled mess. Once securing the hood to her head with a decorative clip, she grabbed some of the books she knew he had already read and made her way towards the door.

"Where does a person develop such an intrigue for the fade?" She asked before closing the door.

"Where indeed." was all she got from him. 'Fine, have your little secrets.' She thought to herself as she quietly closed the door. After taking the books back to her room and shelving them back into her personal collection, she grabbed a small satchel of money, checked her face in the mirror, and swiftly left towards the stable. Once Naug'seus was strapped into the small buggy she laid out some instructions for Yanos and Jun while she was gone and began steering Naug'seus out through the front gates.

The autumn foliage was a relaxing and pleasant sight to behold as she saw the vibrant red and yellow leaves blow across the path before the horse. The farmers had harvested their fields earlier in the week to prevent the eventual frost from destroying the crops. Usually when she saw this it meant the hot days and cool nights of autumn would give way to the cold and bitter winter. She was going to need many food supplies to last since winter seemed to be coming early this year. Her face fell at the thought of eating jarred fruits and vegetables all winter; she liked the thought of winter, but truly despised nearly everything about it. The preserved foods, the constant need for firewood all hours of the day, and her water pipes could burst if she was not careful. Yes, winter was something she could do without.

Her thoughts were brought to a halt as she rode into the town market to be greeted by all the faces of those she healed over the years. The more she worked on this village, the more she began associating them with the various illnesses they carried or the injuries they endured.

The baker had a penchant for burns and cuts, the dressmaker found new and exciting ways to make her dresses so tight and uncomfortable that some of her patrons would soon become her patients. Being the only healer in town made discretion difficult. When they saw her they knew that she knows all their embarrassing medical ailments and she can't help but see those same ailments when she looks at them.

She hated seeing people this way and having them see her in the same manner. She truly wanted retirement more than anything.

## Chapter 7

They watched as their patron led her buggy out the gateway towards town and both were now left alone to tend to the clinic. Yanos grabbed the axe he had propped against the shed earlier and began working on dividing the firewood as requested. Jun however was looking for a momentary distraction before continuing her work, and since their stoic healer hardly left her home during work she thought now would be an opportune moment to take a peek at her secret patient.

"Yanos! Help me out a moment." She ran up to the lithe young man chopping firewood, clearly not interested in what scheme his female counterpart had concocted.

"You know Lady Lavellan wants you back in the clinic, da'len." Not stopping once in his chore.

"You can't tell me you aren't a little curious about this man." She whispered, trying to keep a distance away from his powerful swings.

"No, I have no interest in who our lady treats; private or otherwise." He grabbed another log off the pile and placed it before him before continuing his work.

"All I need is for you to boost me up so I can peek in her window. After that I will continue with my work!"

They both glanced up at the open window to the formally vacant room. To boost someone up to the second floor window would be taxing but Jun knew Yanos was strong enough for the task. He just shook his head and tried once more to finish his work before Dahlia returned home.

"Please, Yanos. It will only take a moment."

"Why don't you walk upstairs and just open the door if you're so curious?" He was now starting to become irritated at Jun's insistence.

"Dahlia would kill me and tell the Creators it was an accident!" She was now begging the man to indulge her this once with promises of peace and treats.

Finally after Jun sat down upon his chop-block preventing him from continuing his work, he reluctantly agreed.

Being ever-mindful of the fact she was wearing a skirt he kept his eyes down and raised her upon his shoulders. She braced against the building but was a few feet too short to peering in through the window.

"A little higher." She whispered down to Yanos, his eyes averted to the ground with his head crowned by the hem of her dress. With his hands firmly wrapped around her ankles he called after her quietly, "Just forget it, this is starting to get stupidly dangerous. I don't want to have to explain to Lady Lavellan how you fell!"

"Just a little higher..." She reached up higher in an attempt to grab the window seal for stability.

Inside the room Fen'Harel continued to remain engrossed in his book. He took a few small breaths through his pipe and let the smoke stream from his nostrils as he turned the pages. Oblivious to the activity outside his window, even as a small hand could be seen waving just barely above the lower frame.

Yanos was starting to sweat from exhaustion. Desperate for this humiliating display to be done he quickly tossed her up before re-positioning his hands from her ankles to the arch of her feet. This was just enough for Jun to get a limited view of the bedroom. The bed was positioned next to wall in a partial blind area that would only let her see the man's lower half. She saw he had on a leg brace and a book propped against the thigh of the other leg, but what caught her attention the most was the smell coming from the room.

Small white streams of smoke floated gently around the room and the smell was unmistakable.

"I knew it!" She yelled, quickly realizing she gave away her presence and tried to drop down out of habit. Yanos fumbled with the sudden loss of balance and in an effort to regain control, leaned forward too quickly and smacked Jun's head against the side of the house before both collapsed in painful heap beneath the window.

Inside, Fen'Harel was startled by the voice and loud thump against the building that he shot up from his bed as quickly as he could without putting too much weight on his leg and briefly looked down from his window seal.

On the ground was a small red-headed girl with both hands covering the entirety of her face in hissing pain while underneath her was a young, red-faced man, with one hand placed over his right eye. Fen'Harel pulled his head in quickly before either had time to notice and closed the window before drawing the curtains.

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Pulling her buggy around the back entrance of the grocer and giving her list of supplies to one of the laborers she left to the library to see if there were any new books available. The library held thousands of books but she was hardly confident the subjects she was looking for would be among them.

She wandered the shelves looking for the library keeper before finding him shelving some books back one of the bookcase's higher shelves. His features were sharp and his grey hair was slicked back to accentuate the 'no-nonsense' attitude he was infamous for.

"Keeper Onn?" She called to him, trying her best to mirror the man's stoic demeanor.

"Lady Lavellan." His voice hollow and bold only made her think about the rumor years ago about how he use to be a commander of sorts for the guard. He would get the sourest look if anyone ever asked if the rumors were true; which was something Dahlia liked to ask him when she was feeling stubborn.

"I'm looking for any books you have on the Fade."

"Leave it to you to ask for a book on the high shelves." He descended the ladder and walked towards one of the larger bookcases that were built directly into the wall. He braced one of the ladders firmly against the thick shelves and climbed almost as far as the ladder would extend. "I have several books here on the subject." He began listing the names before Dahlia just stopped him and asked for any three he would grant her. She supposed he found humor in granting her the custody of three of the thickest tomes he could gather, knowing well the weight would aggravate her as she walked back to her buggy, 'but these books should last him until I need to return to town again.'

Once she left the library, and after arguing with the herb vendor, she returned to her buggy, paid the grocer, and stowed her books before making the ride back home.

Once she passed the threshold of the front gate to the courtyard she steered the horse to the back stables. Stepping out of the buggy she looked for Yanos to help her with Naug'seus and to bring her groceries into the kitchen through the back. She spotted him still chopping firewood, but not before noticing the large black-eye she was sure he did not have before she left.

"What did you do?" she asked as she pulled the hood from her head and grabbed the heavy books from under her seat.

"What did I do?" It was hard to tell his expression with a swollen eye, but she thought she should clarify.

"The eye."

"Something hit me." He seemed to be in a sour mood so she just told him to get something cold on it and started bringing her food supplies inside. Once all her items were put away in the pantry she grabbed a small cake she had bought for Jun as thanks for watching the clinic over the past several days as she tended to her guest.

She unboxed the small cake and put it on a platter before walking into the clinic. "Jun, I'm back. I bought you this ca..." was all she could say before spying the small, fire-haired woman glowering at her from across the room. Her hair slightly tussled, but more surprisingly her face was red and her nose swollen. Jun held a blood stained handkerchief in her hand and was flicking dried blood from the edge of her nostril, not once breaking eye contact with Dahlia.

"You've been smoking." Was all she said. It was more of a statement than a question and this had Dahlia twitching at the thought of being caught.

Dahlia tilted her head so slightly at the accusation but could not piece together how those two were injured and how it was related to her sneaking behind her back to catch a smoke with Fen.

"Do you want this cake?" She spoke slowly, still trying to find a way to understand exactly what went on here while she was gone.

Jun looked very unhappy, perhaps the angriest Dahlia had ever seen from the usually chipper young woman. Jun looked at the cute little pink cake and back at Dahlia. "Yes."

Dahlia set the cake down on a small table next to the door and began slowly stepping back through the doorway out of the clinic as though she were trying to feed a caged animal.

Heading back into the kitchen she grabbed the books off the table and began walking upstairs to give Fen the tomes before she finished prepping their supper. She knocked a few times before she heard his voice and entered the smoke laden room.

She took in a slow, deep breath before taking a step inside and crossing the room to the window. Once opened and the heavy air of the room filtered out she set the books down on the table before turning to him, almost expecting him to look like her team of beaten misfits.

"Funny thing happened," he began. "I heard a yell outside the window and when I looked out I saw your help on the ground."

"On the ground?"

"Yes, they looked as though they were hurt." He added, taking one last breath through his pipe before offering it to her as he picked up one of the new books and began thumbing through it.

"Hurt?" she began contemplating the scenario in her head as she lit the pipe and took a few small puffs before handing it back to him.

She was tired and confused but she could not drop the thought from her head. 'What happened? I was only gone a few hours.' She thought

"What do you think happened?" He inquired, not once looking up from his book.

"I don't know." She exhaled the white smoke before turning around to exit the room to finish cooking.

"No doubt something stupid. But I'll get it out of them."

## Chapter 8

The next few days began to work against her limits.

With her patient now mostly mobile she now felt as though she had a curious child lurking about upstairs as she worked. On no less than three separate occasions did she return upstairs to find him prowling around in any of the other rooms besides his own. Once she found him in her supply closet one afternoon trying to decipher the purpose behind some of the broken surgical instruments that were gathering dust on the shelf. At first she figured this was harmless curiosity of her home since his entire perspective was based on the small bedroom he occupied and what he could see out his window, but the times she caught him snooping around in her bedroom were enough to torment her mind as she worked.

Every time she heard a noise coming from upstairs her breath hitched in her chest as she tried to figure out in her head where he could be and what was he digging through.

She stood up from her current work of bandaging the foot of one of the local farm hands and looked towards her assistant. "Excuse me Jun, I need to go reel in my guest. Take over for a moment."

She hurried upstairs and began looking in each room for her nosy friend before finally opening the door to hers. Immediately she found him propped up on her bed with one of her books, reading as though this is where he always belonged.

"I would not have thought you to be a woman who enjoys romance novels."

Knitting her brow and running her hand through her hair in an effort to downplay the fact she ran upstairs in a worry, she tried to control her breathing before answering him.

"Why is that so surprising? Many women like to read these sort of things." She would only admit she liked to read romance, actual romantic situations on the other hand made her uncomfortable or disgusted. Dragons in fanciful tales are neat, but that doesn't usually mean you go out and try to find one.

"Yes, but you never let me read these when I was bedridden." The amused look on his face told her he was teasing.

"I apologize then. I did not realize you would find such amusement from these particular stories." Her brow began to twitch as she starting making her way over to the bed to try and coax him out, but not before hearing him let out a laugh as he turned the pages.

"I think what's most amusing is you having numerous tags placed before some of the more physical sections."

"Alright, you're done." She snatched the book away from him and walked over to return the book back to her shelf. Keeping her back towards him in an effort to shield the embarrassment and anger that was blooming on her cheeks she calmly turned around to see him playing with a small tuning fork she left on her night stand.

"You are determined to make a fool of me or drive me out of my mind." His smirk was all the affirmation she would need. Letting out a heavy sigh she knew she couldn't get him to leave her room now that he was able to freely move around, 'he'll just come back once I leave'. Walking towards the balcony she drew back the sheer curtains before securing them behind a decorative



hitch and opened the doors to let the cool air in. She took a step out onto the terrace before the sight of a beautiful bird with long red feathers perched itself on the railing. She watched it for a few moments trying to figure out what type of bird would have such a vibrant plumage before her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of shuffling books coming from inside.

Turning to see him up and riffling through her bookcase again the only thing that passed through her thoughts now was a loud, frustrated scream. With him engrossed in his new book, paying her no mind, she silently shook her fist at him before turning her head back to the bird who simply craned its head in what kind of looked like confusion.

"I am going to kill this man." She told the bird in a whisper through her gritted teeth, pointing at him as though she needed to clarify. The bird calmly took a few side-steps away from her on the railing, its long neck straightened up as though it were trying to make itself appear bigger.

She walked back inside and found him smiling down at the new book in his hands. "Don't your other patients need you da'len?" he said, playfully mocking her as he returned the book to its former place. Walking back over to her bed and settling in on her mess of blankets as if to make abundantly clear he would not be returning to his room, she let her shoulders droop in defeat.

"I'll put dinner in the oven followed by my head..." and she walked out to resume her work.

He let out a small chuckle as he watched her close the door and leave him to his mischief. He repositioned the numerous pillows to allow him lay comfortably on the large bed before taking a deep breath of cool air. The bed had the same smell as her powder, which he had found in a copper dish on her vanity and he had come to truly enjoy the fragrance. He found his thoughts drifting back to her and figured he probably shouldn't tease her so much if it truly aggravates her, but the sound of winged flapping drew his attention from his thoughts back into reality. He lifted his head to see a large red bird land on the rug in the center of the room. The bird turned to him before a cloud of smoke arose, filling the entire room before quickly dissipating to reveal a new guest. A robed woman with long, golden hair now stood before him, looking over him briefly before smiling gently. With a jolt he was now seated on the bed at the realization of who this woman was.

"Mythal?!"

"So this is where you've been hiding? Some of us were actually worried since we had not heard anything from you in weeks." Her smile never left her face.

She stood with her hands clasped behind her back as she surveyed the room. Fen'Harel suddenly felt exposed before her, his playful attitude before was no longer evident, he wasn't exactly sure how he could spin this story for her.

"Tell me my friend, how goes your hunt? It doesn't appear you have gotten very far." Not once did her gentle smile fade as she spoke, in fact there was a soft chuckle heard underneath words.

"Without my Orb I was too weak to protect..." he stopped and tried to find the proper word to describe what had happened. Her or myself? Dahlia was certainly not part of his plan to track and destroy whoever took the Orb from his sanctuary, but he would be lying if he didn't admit she was a pleasant distraction from his duty.

"I assume it has something to do with that?" she pointed at the linen bandage around his leg.

"A bear."

"A bear?" her eyebrows raised in surprise at the notion that the fearsome Dread Wolf could be

felled by such a common beast.

"The bear was attacking her." He looked towards the door which Dahlia had exited a few minutes ago.

"So you decided to be the storybook hero and save the damsel? I see..." His embarrassment at her words were obvious. With his elbows dug into his knees and his hands clasped together before him he stared at the ground waiting for her to either chastise him or laugh at his predicament.

But she just watched him. She never meant to make him feel so helpless or embarrassed, but there was another factor to this story that had peaked her curiosity from the moment she saw the woman.

"The young woman. She doesn't know who you are I assume? She certainly wouldn't say those things if she knew who you were."

He laughed at that for a moment before shaking his head. 'I'm not so sure about that.' But the circumstances of his situation removed the humor from his face. The fact that someone would knowingly come into his temple and steal such a powerful object right from underneath him made him realize he could have powerful enemies. If anyone were to find out he were injured and unguarded outside a village of no consequence the thieves might decide this would be the perfect opportunity to kill him and waste the village to ensure their getaway. And he had no doubt they were waiting for him to try and reclaim what was his.

"She is lovely," She said waiting for a reaction. "But her humor..." Mythal was not sure exactly how to discuss a woman who she had only just seen a few minutes ago. "How do you think she would react if she were to know who you are?"

The question was loaded, Fen'Harel knew she was trying to gauge the extent of his involvement with her, but at the same time he was confused about the nature of their friendship himself.

"I'm not sure. She probably wouldn't believe me, or should would smack me the moment she did."

Mythal laughed at the thought, but after a few moments her face fell and her eyes portrayed her sadness clearly.

"We cannot allow you back into Arlathan until the threat is gone. It would be a danger for our people if the Orb is left in the hands of unknown entities." She raised her hands and grasped his face gently, staring into his eyes until his expression mimicked her own.

"But do not be hasty in your recovery. Let your wounds heal, strengthen your body and let the young maiden help you."

His eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"You cannot conquer an army by yourself if a bear can cripple you this much. With the Orb in the hands of another they will have all the power they need to kill you so you will need to start taking things slow and tactfully instead of using brutal force. Bring the woman and plant her among the ranks of the enemy and you will have your advantage." His anger began to fester at the thought. To insinuate that he should use the woman who had helped him recover in such a way that could possibly lead to her death was not something he wanted.

"I would have to tell her who I am..." He turned his gaze back to the floor, he would not dare look upon Mythal in anger.

"Is that a problem?" she withdrew her hands and began walking back towards the balcony.

"She may not even agree to be a part of this! She may not even believe me." He called back to her, the distress in his voice was evident even without seeing his face. Her gaze was drawn towards the sky, she could clearly feel the internal conflict he was having with his morality and his duty.

"Then the fewer people who know you are here, the better." And with a puff of smoke she flew from the room, leaving her friend to interpret her ominous words in the peaceful sanctity of his shelter.

## Chapter 9

Fen'Harel was having some difficulty sorting out the thoughts in his head. Once Mythal had left he could not stand to be in her room any longer, even the fragrance he had come to admire was not enough to relax his mind. He left her room quietly and returned to his bed to contemplate his next course of action and what to do about Dahlia.

'How would telling her the truth affect my mission?' His thoughts drifted through several possible outcomes before he snapped awake at the sound of Dahlia yelling down stairs. He shot up from his bed and opened the door, but was careful of keeping his presence hidden as he watched the events down stairs.

"Get out! I've had enough of your weirdness!" Dahlia was absolutely livid at the young man before her. His clothes were not that of a farmer, in fact they were more refined. 'Perhaps he is of a noble house,' he thought.

"Is this how you normally speak to your patients?" his tone was condescending but his body language made him appear to be at her mercy.

"I've had it with you! You hurt yourself incessantly and you've racked up an enormous bill, which you have yet to pay! So until you do I refuse to treat you and your idiocy, and tell your mother the same goes for her!" There was nothing but hate in her voice for this man. If this was how she treated someone she hated; he let out a breath of relief knowing that no matter how much he aggravated her before, he was not on the same level as this young man.

"Have a care Lady Lavellan." His hands were up in mocking defeat, a friendly smile placed upon his face. "What will people think if this is how you treat one of the noble houses?"

"Your family is a pit of snakes in silks, everybody knows this. I would be surprised if the tavern bard doesn't already spin a tale about your ancestor's deception. So go ahead and make your threats! Say you'll own my clinic and drive me into the woods like some animal! The day they serve me the documents saying you own my home is the day I burn it down! Now get the hell out of my clinic!" She all but chased him from her home before slamming the door on his backside.

"Pompous ass!" she ran her hands through her hair before turning her attention to Jun, standing behind the door frame as she watched the whole exchange.

"We are done for the day." She tried to keep her voice calm for Jun's sake. "Your pay is on my desk, and please try studying that book I gave you. I don't want you accidentally poisoning anyone." She could still feel the heat from her face making her eyes water.

"Anyone other than Degan?" Jun tried bringing a little laughter to the situation.

"I have a special elixir for Degan when I finally lose my mind. Something hideous..." she stopped herself from continuing to entertain that thought and simply bid her assistant good evening before walking into her kitchen.

Fen'Harel waited until he was certain he heard the latch click on the front door before venturing downstairs after Dahlia. He found her violently chopping vegetables, still fuming after that spat. Fearful of having her accidentally cut off her own fingers by accident he made his presence known to her by quickly grabbing her wrists which earned him a startled gasp.

"Don't do that." She tried smothering her panic before letting go of her knife. "If I thought you were

anyone else I would have probably made a mess of you with that thing."

He quietly let go of her wrists and let her walk away from the table to sit down upon a bench in a shadowy alcove next to the fire place. He picked up the knife and began calmly finishing her work, allowing this moment to let her settle down. After several minutes of standing he began feeling an uncomfortable ache in his leg, she watched as he shifted his weight onto his good leg and quietly stood up.

"Here." She said pointing to her former spot. "I'm collected now so just have a seat." She looked at her table and saw he had done more than enough and so she just raked her items into a pot and replaced the lid. After checking the bread baking in her oven she walked back to the cutting table and loomed over it, thinking about what else she needed to do before supper. She was exhausted and just wanted to lie down and sleep, but there was so much work to do before bed that she wasn't even feeling all that hungry.

Propping his leg up on a sack of fruit laying on the floor he watched her closely. Her face was placid and her eye drooped with fatigue as she stared off and away from reality. He wanted to say something to break the silence but he wasn't sure exactly how talk to her without bringing up either the events of today or emphasizing the awkwardness of their current moods. It was then she stirred for a moment, she craned her neck slightly and rolled her shoulder, this was enough to break her out from her mind and remind her of her guest, waiting patiently on the bench.

"Sorry. I was just... thinking." Her voice gave away her state of exhaustion instantly. It felt as though her thoughts were incomplete and her mind was thick with black nothing. She didn't feel like having a conversation; she didn't even want to work on the things she knew would set her mind at ease. She just wanted to...

She didn't know what would make her feel better. Sleep? Food? She felt lazy and wanted to indulge this feeling, but with what? She wasn't sure.

He could practically feel the fatigue radiating off her and figured that she had been pushing that feeling away with a sense of obligation for days now. The argument with that man must have been the tipping point, sending all her worries and weariness spilling out in front of her.

"Come." He said, shifting himself to make room on the bench beside him. "Sit down and relax, if only for a moment."

She was unnoticeably thrilled at the idea of getting off her feet for a few minutes. Walking over to the bench and sitting down next to him, she pulled her legs up to her side and buried herself into the corner of the alcove. Her hands clasped together in her lap and with her eyes shut she let herself sink into the cold stone.

She looked so peaceful and statuesque in his eyes that he felt himself relax along with her. Thinking about Mythall's words had upset him earlier, but right now was a time to relax and let their problems escape their minds. His meditation however was interrupted as she shuffled in her position, he looked to find her trying to find a more comfortable position against the wall for her shoulder; clearly it was bothering her.

His mind suddenly began recalling the women he had seduced in the past. Some women would be fearful of him, his power, the Dread Wolf. The moniker had earned him fear and adoration from all walks of life, and he usually reveled in the attention. Women were eager but afraid of his power, but he found many ways to put their minds at ease before more intimate acts were engaged.

While that was not the intention now, he thought he could help comfort her in a more

companionable manner.

He shifted his body to mold his back against the wall and reached out to her and pulled her body against his chest. She stiffened at the sudden touch and movement that her whole body reacted in surprise. Her anger began to spike at this sudden invasion of personal space that she felt she was about to swing her fist into his face. His hands moved to her shoulders and he began squeezing the area gently, feeling for the stress she had accumulated in those muscles.

"Please relax. I'm only trying to help this pain in your shoulders." The concept of relaxing in such a way felt like a foreign concept to her. His thumbs felt as though they were digging hard into her back and this just made her tense up even further.

"That hurts, what are you trying to do?"

"As I said before, but if you don't relax it won't help me." He removed his thumbs from the motions and simply began kneading the front of her shoulders as gently as he could. The tension he felt was not just from her reaction but more from the stress she had accumulated over such a long period of time; he wondered if anyone had given her a massage before now.

She tried to do as he asked by taking in a few deep breaths and ease into his touch. After a few moments the pain in her shoulders began to soften into something more like a tender ache before completely dissipating. Once he felt her completely relax he moved her hair over her shoulder and placed his thumbs back into their original spots to resume his work.

She let her long hair pool into her lap as he began relieving the tension from her body. To her it was akin to lying in a hot spring and she began working the tangles from the bottom of her hair, eyes closed in apparent bliss.

He felt her melt into his hands; he could smell the powdery fragrance on the back of her neck more clearly without her hair padding her back. Aside from the talc base he could smell dried roses, or perhaps sunflowers; she must have ground up some of the petals or oils and mixed it together. Either way, to him it smelt almost heavenly. He breathed deep her scent and moved his hands down her shoulders until he found the spot she was fussing with before.

Using a little bit of magic he tried to work away what was no doubt the pain from a former injury. "Did you hurt yourself when you were chased by the bear?" he whispered gently behind her ear, the smooth flow of his voice made her hair stand up.

"No. I hurt my shoulder a long time ago." Her voice was so soft she did not sound like her normal self. He smiled at the thought that this was her naturally calm state, that her previous outbursts and abrasive attitude were not the only emotions she could express. "It must have been serious if you still carry the pain to this day."

"No, just being a foolish child. I was thrown from my horse and just hit the ground. It acts up when the weather's foul." She whispered, pulling the tangles from the root of her hair down the tips. The combination of hair combing and massaging was lulling her to sleep in his hands. With her body slowly going limp against his chest he decided that this was enough for now, but he just sat there with his hands lightly grasping her arms, not moving. Sitting perfectly still he could feel her slow, deep breaths through his chest which signaled to him she was absolutely asleep.

He wasn't exactly sure what to do now that he was essentially pinned against the wall. He tried gently shaking her, whispering her name, even clearing his throat, but all this got him was a small whine and small jab from her elbow. "Cute." He said in amusement as he bent his head down into her hair, nuzzling the back of her head. He wasn't sure why he did this, but he figure if there was

one thing she always responded to, it was his teasing. He let go of her arms and brought his hands up to her neck, cradling her head in one hand while he continued to bury his face into the soft white silk of her hair. She began to stir underneath his teasing, brows knitting and eyes pulled tight she became just aware enough to realize exactly who was getting a little too frisky behind her.

"Hey!" She jumped up out of his grasp; looking back at him she saw the largest grin on his face before he burst into a fit of laughter. Her cheeks and the tips of her ears were flushed red with such embarrassment she could barely make out the threat she wanted to say next.

"Do you want to sleep in the stable?!" grabbing her ears and turning away from him as a last resort to hiding her humiliation.

"Of course not." He said through his laughter, "But from what I could tell, your bed is plenty big enough for two..." that comment got him a tomato right in the face. He continued to grin and chuckle as he wiped the sour fruit from his eyes, clearly he was proud of the reaction it got him.

"You worm..." she turned away from him to see a small stream of black fog weaving its way from the edges of the oven door.

## Chapter 10

The smoldering husk of what was meant to complement their dinner was beyond edible and more suitable as fertilizer now. Once the oven had opened the entire kitchen flooded with smoke, stinging their eyes and sending them both into fits of coughing. Opening the back door she grabbed her oven mitts and threw the blackened rock out into the dirt before grabbing a bucket of water and dowsing the fiery mound to finish the job. Fen'Harel stood back in the doorway waving a mat, trying to redirect the black fog out of the kitchen before it had a chance to spread throughout the rest of the house.

"All that messy work..." she grumbled as she walked back into the kitchen.

"You treat festering wounds and this is messy work to you?" he closed the door behind her and placed the mat back on the floor.

"Well the flour doesn't say 'thank you' and give me three silver pieces for turning it into bread, does it?"

"Well I'm certain that tomato you threw at me earlier would have preferred a different fate as well." Remembering the tomato from earlier had him looking down at his white cotton tunic for any stains.

"Dammit, I'm out a tomato and three cups of flour now because of you."

"I rub your aching shoulders and allow you a moment's respite and you throw a tomato at me and say it's my fault?" He was mildly irritated at the accusation, but once she pulled the pot from the fire and placed it on the table she turned her gaze to meet his with a fiery anger to match the hearth's glow.

"Neither of these things would have happened if you hadn't..." her annoyance began clouding her thoughts, words were not flowing as they normally would and this made Fen'Harel laugh, "i-if you hadn't done the thing! Gotten frisky! Distracted me!" the final words were the ones she had originally wanted, but the wider his smile got the more she realized she could not win this fight. His laugh came from deep within his chest and he looked away momentarily to spare her the humiliation it insinuated.

Once silent, he turned his gaze back to hers and began closing the distance between them with fluid strides until her back was pressed against the stone wall in an effort to somehow maintain her freedom. Grinning with confidence, he craned his head closer to her face until they nearly touched, "If I was wishing to distract you I can think of many other pleasing ways to get your attention." His smoldering gaze was met with an oven mitt.

She pushed his head back and away from hers, "What? Have you been drinking rotten elixirs? Who talks like that?" She could feel the heat from his breath through the mitt with an audible sigh. "You don't have very many friends do you?" his voice muffled through the thick fabric.

"The hell sort of friends do you have? Don't tell me this is how you normally talk to your friends?"

He laughed to himself as he thought back to the day he tried something similar on Ghilan'nain once. Andruil put an arrow in his back just before he received a swift smack across the face. "I think my friends actually hate me to be honest." He took a step back and allowed her to retreat from his hold.



"I've had wonders with not being a sexually-assertive bastard." Her quips managed to get her a smirk and nod before he turned to walk back to his original position on the opposite side of the table.

"I don't know if I want to take your advice or not. By my count I only see one other person who genuinely appreciates your company. Two if I feel generous enough to include your stable hand." Sitting on the stool opposite from her at the table he watched her set their meals before them and gave her a playful wink.

"So your advice would be to actively engage people in a sexual manner to amass more friends?" she seated herself across from him and folded her arms on the table, waiting for her meal to cool.

"That's not exactly what I meant, but for you I think it could work better than you realize." Befuddled by the comment, she wasn't sure how to react. Was he teasing her or complimenting her? It certainly felt like both.

Turning his body to the side and propping his head up in his hand, he feigned interest. "I personally think you are too rigid to let yourself loosen up like that. Your body might seize up in rejection." He was clearly baiting her for a reaction, but the realization came too late when she bolt up from her seated position to stare down at him.

"You don't know me! I have..." she paused long enough to realize she almost let slip a little secret of hers. Recognizing his usual attempts to rile her up, she quietly sat back down and began stirring her soup with a calm expression. His curiosity had boiled over the moment she stopped mid sentence. "You have... What?"

"A secret." was all she said before taking a quiet sip from her spoon.

"A secret? One I assume you don't want to tell me." He spun his body around to its former position and leaned slightly forward at this new information.

"Perhaps..." she began, smiling on the inside at the fact she manage to turn this whole exchange in her favor, "...one day, I may let you know my little secret." Now it was her turn to smirk.

Being on the receiving end of the hook was not something he was use to experiencing before. Many women were usually very receptive to his particular charm when applied, but he knew his reputation is what garnered most of his admiration; however, she would have none of it. This was the first time in many years he was seen as normal man by a normal woman and he was unable to determine if his flirting was getting him closer or pushing him away from her good graces. But all that uncertainty shattered with her response and he didn't know exactly how to duplicate the reaction from her. He wanted to play this game, but he wasn't sure of the rules.

They quietly finished their meal and began cleaning the kitchen until the sun had completely set. Even though tomorrow was technically her day of rest she still wanted to complete her work back in her elixirs room and he, not feeling particularly tired, had followed her.

He lit the candle sconces in the room for her and reclined on the chaise in the back corner. She went through her cabinets and began writing down a list of herbs she would need and he quietly watched her work. With her back turned towards him he felt safe from her judgment and let his eyes wander over her dimly lit features.

He could barely help fantasizing about her in this light. Her dress was comprised of several layers of fabric which hung off her hips in various lengths; it reminded him of a wilting flower. The top however did not hang as loosely as the bottom and it was made to obviously accentuate the breasts.

The entire dress was sleeveless, but he supposed that she added the shawl to help keep her warm as well as keep a person's focus on her eyes and not let them wander, sadly. He wondered how many men were actually enamored with her but too shy or intimidated to compliment; he could definitely see how her attitude could make a person squirm.

She caught his reflection on one of her glass jars on the shelf and noticed he was watching her backside. While she continued to take count of her supplies she noticed how she repeatedly kept looking back at his reflection. She found him handsome enough she supposed, his physique was certainly quite impressive; even Yanos wasn't built like him despite all his hard work. Broad shoulders were masked by a loose-fitted cotton tunic and his leather breeches helped to accentuate the muscles in his legs. He practically radiated with power and charm, but she wouldn't let him try his games on her, yet. If Jun ever saw him she was certain she would have to cripple her to prevent her from trying her tricks. She wouldn't be surprised if she would try and climb in through his window.

Without turning around she called out to him, "What exactly are looking at with such a serious expression?" as though she had no idea.

His posture straightened in surprise as he discovered she had actually spied him watching her. There was no annoyance in her voice, in fact she sounded rather pleased with herself either by catching him in the act or realizing what he was staring at.

But he was not one to shy away when it came to these sort of things, "I enjoy watching you move." His voice was deep yet quiet; she could practically feel the sultry air of his breath from even this distance.

"I move no different than any other woman." She continued her work but found herself distracted by the heat in her cheeks and her shallow breathing; even becoming more aware of how her heartbeat made her feel as though she were swaying.

"No. Your movements are powerful and confident. You see no reason to walk or act in a way that would please anyone but yourself. You have no idea how... sexy it looks."

The loud ringing of the jars as they clashed together from the slip of her grasp gave away her overwhelmed reaction. She silently cursed her shaky hands and continued to write on her parchment.

He quietly stood up from his seat and walked towards her, stopping behind her to rest his hands gently on her shoulder. She could not move. She felt as though the wolf she had seen once before had caught her like a weakened halla and all she could do is wait for the killing bite.

He nuzzled his face into her hair much like before as he made his way down through to her neck, taking in her fragrance once more.

"Your scent is also quite lovely." Putting her quill down on the parchment she tilted her head away from his to allow him better contact with her skin. As he craned his neck at the invitation a few ropes of his hair fell onto her breast and she leaned back against his chest, letting her head fall back onto his shoulder. His hands fell onto her hips and he gave them a gentle squeeze before biting her neck tenderly.

The gasp which escaped her mouth made her chest fill and expand her bosom against the confines of her clothes; exactly what he wanted to see. He could see her jaw clench just before she began to try and wriggle her way out of his grasp, he pulled his head back and let her go as she turned around to see him leering down upon her. Before she could object his hands had cupped her face

and pulled her into a deep kiss, pinning her against the edge of her desk with his body. He placed his thumb on the soft curb of her chin and pushed down to allow his tongue to hers, deepening the kiss as she offered no resistance. The soft pads of her fingers gently caressed his jaw turning the once hard kiss into a slow and tender touch. Her hands fell to his chest as she gently pushed him away from her body, his breathing was labored from the upset of excitement and he calmly stepped away to give her the room she wanted.

“You are quite spirited.” She said, trying to control her breathing along with him. He grinned at her, trying once again to initiate their kiss from before, “You have no idea.”

She gently placed her hands back on his chest and fully extended her arms to ensure the distance remained between their bodies, “But I think this is as far as we are going to go for now.”

## Chapter 11

A splash of water to the face to help him calm down.

He was back in his small room, hunched over the water basin as he washed his body with a rag and cold water. The cold air coupled with the frigid water managed to break his focus on her and let his mind wander to more pressing issues.

Silently chastising himself, 'why didn't you tell her? She is going to hate you when she finds out! She won't agree to help me, and perhaps that is for the best.' Throwing the rag back into the basin and walking over to his bed he grabbed the thick blankets and quietly slid between them. 'I need to see Mythal. She must have another answer.' Closing his eyes and taking in slow deep breaths, he let his consciousness drift into the Fade to search for his friend.

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She stoked the flames in her fireplace before curling up with her blanket on the rug in front of the hearth. She had grabbed a book to read in an effort to ease her mind of the events that transpired today, but she let the book sit before her and let her eyes focused on the flames as she mentally slapped herself.

'You opened a jar of bees by letting that happen.' She glared at the fire as though it were the one reprimanding her. 'You can't do this sort of thing with your patients.' She paused at that statement. 'Everyone in the village has been my patient at one point or another. Do I not deserve that little bit of joy others have?' Looking down at the book in her lap, she resented the story within. "You stupid books offer me no answers. At this point in the story we would be getting down and dirty in the barn." And with that she tossed the book into the fire.

The flames lapped at the hard binding, turning the green leather black while making quick work of the dried papers between. She watched the book burn silently for a few moments before she threw her head back and let out a groan. "Fuck! That was my favorite book! Now I'll have to buy a new one from Onn." The thought of ordering a smut filled book from the village's most stoic and humorless man was not something she enjoyed thinking about. With a huff she twisted the thick blanket around her body to create a soft nest and decided to just sleep her worries away.

Sleep did not come easy however, but thinking about a fresh new day helped to settle her mind.

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Focusing his thoughts on the smells he knew he eventually picked up on the faint scent of honey tea and gold. Mythal. With incredible speed he traversed across the spectral plains of the Fade, letting his beast loose on the trail to find his friend.

The hard pounding of his paws on the ground gave the Fade a moment of clarity with each step. He could see the forest bloom under his feet and rivers splash in his wake, but the images would only stay for so long until finally decaying back into its former, barren landscape. However, once his nose began picking up the stronger scent the Fade began shifting automatically before him. Such natural magical energy to reflect such lucidity upon the ghostly realm could only come from Mythal. He walked slowly towards the powerful source until he found her, sitting upon the steps of polished marble surrounded by red blossoms and rich green grass.

"I thought you would want to see me. You were troubled when I left so it's not surprising to see you here my Dread Wolf."

He let his head hang low while keeping contact with her gaze as he walked slowly up the steps to meet her. Once he reached the top she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head into her lap; his body fell to the side as he let her smooth his fur and allow him a moment to gather his thoughts after such an arduous trek.

“Please.” His voice was soft, “Please. I-I can’t...” She could clearly feel the pain and resentment from his voice and knew exactly what made him so conflicted.

“You must do this. I can only help you so much but the Orb must be returned. Elgar’nan has allowed you a chance to redeem yourself, but I cannot help.”

“Then tell me, who is responsible? Where can I find them?” He did not like admitting the trail he once had was no longer useful since incurring his injuries, but he had little choice. Unless the thief managed to unlock the orb’s power enough for him to sense it he would have little luck finding it so long as it remained a dead object. However, should the Orb’s power actually be released then it could be too late to stop it; Elgar’nan would have him executed for his negligence.

“If I tell you now you will rush into an ambush and die. They are waiting for you; they know you’ll try to reclaim the Orb.” Her hands on his plush coat did little to soothe his worries. “Let her help you.”

“By having her run into the trap instead?”

“She can be a greater tool than you realize. Perhaps you cannot sense it, but she wants to leave her village. She wants more from her life, has strong ambitions but is held back by duty and obligation to her village.” He tried to look back on any past conversations that could have hinted as such, but could not.

“Give her a new sense of duty. She will follow, I know this.”

He gently picked up his head from her lap and stood before calmly walking back down the stairs, “But I don’t want her to.”

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The activities of the morning went by without much discussion. Fen’Harel woke up with more questions than answers and Dahlia woke up on the floor. Both, needless to say were going through their own difficulties that morning. Once breakfast and chores were complete Dahlia grabbed her list of herbs and began prepping herself to trudge through the forest in their search.

“You are going through those woods again? I thought you would have learned from last time how dangerous that is.” He was clearly nervous at the thought of her being attacked by another creature.

“I’ve been doing this for years. That one time was just me being too careless to realize where I was.” She put on her thick hooded shawl and began gathering supplies for her basket.

“Then I’m coming with you!” before she could protest he grabbed his coat and pulled up his hood in hopes this was enough to shield his identity in the off-chance they ran into another stranger.

“Normally I would say no, but you need to start walking more on that leg again.” And with that she pulled an ornate staff from the corner of the room and handed it to him for use as a walking stick before gathering her basket in hand and leaving.

The warmth of the sun could not penetrate the shadows of the forest. The cool stillness of the air chilled them, but they pressed forward on the thin path towards the creek, his eyes focusing all around in an effort to preempt any dangerous creatures.

"I've been meaning to tell you something." The sudden sound of his voice had made her jump, she had been focusing on trying to find a rare herb around these parts that she let her mind erase the fact she had company.

"Okay?" This sounded rather ominous and so they both stopped to give this matter their full attention. He refused to look her in the eye, this was something he was hoping he would not have to tell her for fear her opinion of him would change.

"The truth." He began; he looked around for a moment to ensure there was absolutely no chance anyone was around to hear him.

She stood there watching him fidget, becoming a little anxious at what he might have to confess. She quietly set down her basket and crossed her arms, waiting patiently for his reply. 'Please don't be a bandit. Or a murderer. Or married. Because that would make things very weird right now.' The smirk on her face had betrayed where her thoughts went, his expression soured at the thought she was thinking this confession so humorous but he continued.

"The truth is that 'Fen' is not my real name. Not truly."

"Yeah, I got that the first time." She gave a small chuckle as he turned his face away from her in irritation.

"You don't have any idea how difficult this is! How difficult it is feeling that once you know who I am your views will change."

"I don't see how. Regardless of your name I still think you're kind of a prick." He wanted to stay angry but as he let out a small, involuntary laugh. She smiled at the thought of finally breaking his bitter mood and she slowly made her way towards him until they were so close she had to crane her head up to meet his gaze.

He quickly composed himself as he looked down upon her face, clearly waiting for him to continue with his confession. He loved the way her hood framed her face but she clearly did not enjoy the same sight with him and gingerly reached up to lay his flat before letting her hands settle on his chest. He slowly closed his eyes and pressed his head against hers, letting his hands rest at the top of her hips.

"You think I'm a prick?" he whispered. Her quiet laughter let him relax in this momentary distraction, "You were kind of a prick." He nestled his body against hers, brushing his lips against her cheek, trying to draw out the moment for as long as possible. In truth he couldn't recall another moment in time where he felt such a strong emotional attachment to a person. This woman who masks an uncomfortable situation behind humor, who has gone to great lengths to promote his health, who reads ludicrous romance fiction, had managed to stir him in a way that made him fearful of her judgment.

"So...what is your name?" such a sweet voice. He wanted to escape her grasp in a last moment effort to keep his secret, but she felt his body move away and quickly grabbed a fist-full of his tunic and held him fast. "Just tell me your damn name, already!" She was about to pull him to the ground in an effort to ensure he couldn't run, but he wrapped his arms around her body and held her tightly to his chest as he let his head bury itself into her neck. This was not the reaction she was expecting.

"I don't want you to hate me, or fear me, or give more than you normally would..." His grasp loosened and he pulled away to let her see the most tormented look flood his face. She felt a twinge of guilt as she watched him work his thoughts around in his head; in an effort to try and assure him

that her opinion would hardly change she reached up to place her hands behind his neck and gave him a small kiss.

“I think I deserve a little joy in my life, and right now you make me feel... happy.” she confessed. “You with your stupid prodding at my insecurities, makes me feel like a normal person. But also something special...”

He closed his eyes once more and gave a tender kiss in return, “I feel the same.”

“So, may I know your name?”

He had a moment of courage from her confession and he dipped his head down to rest his lips beside her ear. He kept his eyes close and whispered softly, “I am sorry.” He ran a hand through her hair and continued.

“I am Fen’Harel.”

## Chapter 12 NSFW

### Chapter Summary

Just letting you know that this chapter contains some explicitly sexual scenes.

She held onto him, adoringly, letting the words bounce around in her mind. It wasn't until she finally processed those words when her body instantly tensed and she flung herself from his embrace. "Oh! Oh. Oh no..." she wasn't exactly sure how to react to his confession. She wanted to believe he was lying or this was some joke he was playing, some form of teasing to poke fun at her reaction. She watched his expression, waiting for that sly grin of his to creep onto his face, instead his face fell in despair and embarrassment and he turned away from her.

"This isn't some joke of yours is it?" she was desperate for his response, what ever it may be, "You're truly him?" She felt desperate for air. Feeling the blood drain from her face she felt her legs shake before she dropped to her knees in sudden exhaustion. Hearing her fall behind him, he turned around to see her on the ground gripping the soil in an effort to stay stable. He returned to his position before her and sunk to his knees, placing his hands on her shoulders to keep her from collapsing into the dirt.

"I am so sorry." Sincerity and pain flooded his voice and she forced out a small laugh.

"I'm an idiot!" her breathing had quickened and she could feel the panic boiling over and spill into her words.

"Wolf-man. Magical wolf-man. Wants to be called Fen? Oh Creators..." she finally brought her eyes up to his, "Not you! Or maybe. I have...What? Oh, I feel sick." She wrapped her arms around her stomach and leaned forward until her head pressed against his chest.

"I'll take you home!" He picked her up and cradled her between his arms. Through her breaths she managed to say, "No! Don't take me... I need those herbs!"

"You can barely breathe!" he declared, prepared to ignore her protest and take her back home. That is until he felt the heel of her foot kick back into his side. "This is important dammit! Take me to the creek!" she knew being angry would just rush the blood to her head but she was in desperate need of those plants, otherwise she would have to buy them and be unable to pay Jun and Yanos the next week.

Pushing past his irritation he knelt down enough for her to grab her basket and began walking towards the creek as she demanded.

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Letting her relax upon a small hill overlooking the creek bed allowed her a moment to rest and collect her thoughts as she watched Fen'Harel dig through the frigid water for lotus roots. She watched him carefully as she pulled the leaves from the stem of the other plants he gathered for her. The Pantheon and their individual temples were located in various districts around Arlathan. 'The Gods rarely ever left the sanctity of their temples, so what could be the reason for Fen'Harel to venture so far away from his sanctuary?' She wondered.

With a handful of lotus blossoms and roots he staggered up the small hill, exhausted and cold from



the water. She motioned for him to sit and rest with her and with a small grunt dropped to the ground beside her and placed the plants inside the small basket.

His leg was hurting him, that much was evident by his expression. She reached into her basket and pulled out a small vial of green liquid and gave it to him. As he took the vial from her hands he felt as though his stomach would disintegrate at the sight of it. After all this time he couldn't figure out why she couldn't make these more palatable. After a moment of mental preparation and a painful swallow he felt his whole body shiver in disgust at the foul taste.

Then he heard a chuckle.

He had heard her laugh a few times before, but this to him was like hearing music for the first time in ages. He felt the tension and uneasiness from earlier quickly dissolve in that moment and smiled to himself as the elixir began easing away his pain. His chest felt swollen with happiness as he looked over to see her softly smiling at him while she continued her work.

"I never would have thought a God could be so..." her voice was cut off by an eager kiss. With his hand threaded through her hair, he kept her head in place as he let his lips taste hers. With his other hand he reached out for hers and grabbed the leaves from her fingers and tossed them to the side before pulling her body closer to his.

She let his hands wander over her skin, her clothes, gripping her hair as the kiss became more passionate. She fell back into the plush grass and pulled him on top of her before letting her fingers run over the edge of his jaw and caress the short, soft hair on the side of his head. Pulling away from her lips he began placing tender bites down her neck, licking the pink flesh as he traveled lower to the swell of her chest.

Her breathing became shallow and quick, her body shivering with anticipation and chill, she pulled his head from her chest and placed a kiss on his soft lips.

"It's getting colder." She said between their lips as he eagerly returned her kiss. He didn't want to hear any excuses, he felt teased and helpless before her, the beast inside him was going mad with lust each time he inhaled in her scent. "I-I..." he let his head press against her chest and let out a tortured groan. He pulled his body off hers and quickly gathered her plants and placed them inside her basket before standing to assist her up from her reclined position. The wind had increased by the time they found the trail and the icy chill told them both that a cold storm was brewing.

He held her to his side as they walked down the beaten path in an effort to keep her somewhat warm. The trees managed to dampen the wind mostly, but through the canopy the sky had become dark and grey. About halfway home they felt the stinging daggers of the freezing rain hit their faces and before long the sleet had drenched them both. The frozen rain was quick and violent, by the time they found the edge of the forest the entire valley was covered in an icy slush.

He let go of her and they both ran as fast as they could the final mile back to her home. Their feet were red from the freezing pain and the tips of their ears felt as though they would break off, but they finally made it home. She peeled off her wet shawl and he shrugged off his jacket as they both made their way upstairs to her room. She walked to her fireplace and tried stoking the embers to ignite the logs she placed, but the logs were too fresh. With a quick snap of his fingers he set the logs ablaze instantly and began pulling off his wet shirt and depositing it, along with his jacket, into the wicker basket next to the door. She stood up and grabbed a plush white towel from a basket next to her bathtub and gave it to him. He took the towel eagerly and stood in front of the fire as he dried his body, watching her as she sat on the edge of the large tub.

She lifted the hair from her back and began wringing out all the cold water into the bathtub.

Fen'Harel saw how her soaking dress clung to her curved body and he felt hypnotized watching the tips of her breast stand out against the cold fabric, bouncing with each breath. He turned away from her to watch the fire blaze and give her some privacy; she appreciated the gesture as she began peeling off her wet dress and stockings. After discarding her clothes and putting on her robe she grabbed a comb and walked towards Fen'Harel to sit in front of the fire and brush her hair.

He sat down next to her, wringing out the water from his hair into the towel and watch her as she delicately picked out the tangles from her matted mane. Once she was finished and laid the comb on the floor, he pulled her to him and began licking and biting her neck once more. She gave a soft moan and he pulled her further into his lap, kissing her chilled skin and licking the water that dripped from her hair onto her chest. The heat from his breath warmed her and she clenched her thighs together as the sudden pulse of lust began playing with her most sensitive spot. She held his head between her hands and hugged him to her chest as she peppered small kisses to his forehead before lifting his lips to hers. He felt the water from his hair drip down his face and broke the kiss for a moment to wipe his head on the shoulder of her robe before resuming.

The kiss grew longer and more passionate with each breath they could take and soon he could no longer stand the teasing kisses and tender touches; he let his hands grasp her neck and slide down her shoulders and underneath her robe, exposing her breasts to the heat of his body and cold chill of the room. He brought her up to sit in his lap, her hands gathering the bottom of her robe into her lap to cover her sex, and let her straddle his thighs as he let his hands gently massage her breast before bringing the tip to his lips. Hooking an arm around her back and pulling her tight to his chest he gently stroked the nipple with his tongue before rolling the hardened tip between his teeth. The quick breath and moan which escaped her lips had him growling against her in agony as the feeling of the tight confinement of his breeches against his hardened member grew worse.

Hearing his voice rumble in his chest was incredible. The lust he had for her, the growls, the bites, it felt as though he were the dreaded beast of legends, taking her as his sacrifice. She loved this feeling of being affectionately devoured by an incredible being; as though she had no control over what was to happen next. He teased each breast with his fingers and bites and it wasn't long before she felt the slick nectar of her sex drip from her onto his leather breeches.

With a quick movement he gathered her up and laid her flat on the floor between him and the fireplace before continuing his torturous abuse on her breasts. Unknotting the loosened sash from her robe allowed the material to fall and expose her body to the air, he pulled back to sit on his heels and paint a mental picture of her position in his head. With the robe underneath her and her legs close to prevent him from spying her wetness, she reminded him of an image he spied in one of the lewd picture novels which some young men would hide underneath their beds. He smiled to himself at the comparison before spreading her legs to permit him closer to her mouth as he bit her bottom lip playfully.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked as she returned his gentle kiss.

"I was just thinking about having you painted like this for my temple." She gave him a quiet chuckle as she wove her fingers through his hair, deepening their kiss.

"That's awful, don't say that." But her smile gave away her jest.

"It would increase attendance. Marble carvings of your exposed body in my offering chamber would bring even Andruil to my temple." He had to laugh at himself for that one. Not finding the thought of her naked body plastered around his temple nearly as amusing she reached down between them and softly grabbed the taut mass of his breeches, instantly silencing his laughter and replacing it with a tortured moan.

His head dropped between her breasts and he began trailing hungry kisses down her stomach. "Let's see how you enjoy being played with." His fingers fluttered their touch against her wet folds, eliciting a sudden breath. "Shaved? Were you hoping I would notice?" His lewd remarks were starting to feel embarrassing, but her face flushed and her breath seized when he eventually found a very sensitive area to toy with his tongue.

"And what is this?" There was a hint of delight to his voice as he drew his fingers up to the small silver ring piercing the thin flesh above her clit. "It would seem you are not as uptight as I originally thought." He gave the ring a quick flick with his finger and watched as her arms clutched to her breast and her back bow slightly against the floor. Toying with that little ring had made her extremely sensitive to his touches. As he pressed the ring down into her clit she would fight back her moans, but when his tongue played with the small accessory she found herself losing the battle.

"You know...not very many women get these little, accoutrements." He would be the first to admit taking more than his fair share of women to bed, but rarely did he ever see these piercings on those women. It was practically a taboo to have these done, let alone asking someone else to do this to you as a request; he had to ask her where she obtained it.

"I did it myself, when I was younger." She seemed rather proud of it and he wasn't one to argue. The lissome build of her body accompanied by the small glittering steel peeking out from between her sex was a very arousing sight. "Why? If you don't mind me asking." She shot him a shameless look as her hands slid down her body to the very ring in question. "I love how it feels."

He watched as she massaged the ring against her clit in a gentle circle; his mind went instantly blank. She would not beg for his touch, not yet. She sat up and kissed him teasingly before pulling on the leather stings of his breeches. The sudden tug from the ever-present tightness in his trousers had jostled his mind awake and he assisted her in freeing his heavy erection from their confines. The sudden release in pressure coaxed a sigh of relief until the pressure was replaced with the gentle squeeze of her delicate fingers. It had been years since her last sexual encounter with another man, but she could already tell he was an impressive size from what she was previously accustomed to.

The slow stroking from her hand and the gentle kisses she placed on his lips and neck could be classified as torture in his mind. Stimulating all his senses at once, he couldn't be sure exactly how long he could let this continue. The wind battered against the house with strong gusts as ice pelted the window panes. The fire crackled and spit against the decorative metal screen, the room smelt of burning pine while the fire cast a dim, orange glow across the room, but none of that broke his attention from the lust filled look she gave him.

"How do you want me?" she whispered, removing her hand from his pulsing shaft she placed the soft pads of her fingers on his jaw line and kissed the small hollow on his chin.

"On your back. Open to me." and as he commanded she lay on the floor, bringing her knees up enough to let her feet brace to each side. He hooked his arm underneath her rear and drew her hips up into his lap before sinking into her with his hardened cock. The silver ring glowed to reflect the orange heat surrounding the room and he watched it closely as he began slowly thrusting into her.

"Y-You feel larger than I t-thought you would..." her breaths were quickly becoming labored with each slow pull along his erection. Starting slow and letting her feel accustomed to his size was a test of his fortitude. He smiled down at her, letting the sweat fall from his brow onto her belly and watching as it slowly trailed up to the underside of her breasts. "Am I now?"

Deciding to test their coupling he gave her a quick, hard thrust, smirking when it brought forth a loud cry of ecstasy from her mouth. "That was beautiful. Let me hear more..." he quickened his

pace, listening to her pleasure mount. Just as she was nearing the peak of her bliss he pulled out suddenly, much to her dismay. She was so close she habitually wanted to grind the ring into her and finish, but his hand caught her wrist before she could.

“No. Not yet. Turn over.” His cock was twitching at the sudden cease in action and his eyes spoke of urgency and need. She did as she was told, bringing her knees up and turning to the side, but the movement was not fast enough for him. He picked her up and brought her down on her knees, pressing his hand down on her shoulder blades until her chest was flush against the floor. It was a bit difficult to breathe in this position but she endured, feeling the slickness of her sex dripping onto the floor underneath her. He wasted no time diving into her in this new position, and he knew she would greatly appreciate the added stimulation. His thrusts were quick and deep and with each impact he hit against that tiny ring she enjoyed so much.

Her cries were becoming more desperate, “Please! Mercy!”

He gave a deep laugh as he used his hands to grip her hips and bring her down hard against him with each new thrust. “You know Gods require a penance, sweet vixen. And I will have mine.” With one hand snaked underneath her, he sent a small pulse of magic through her ring.

She cried out to the floorboards. Her climax had her shaking and he could feel each tremor rack her body as he thrust violently into her, desperate to join her. “T-Tight! I’m almost there! Almost...”

“No, please!” she cried through her orgasm, “Please don’t! Not inside me!” her voice was almost pained as she pleaded with her lover.

He wanted to come badly inside her, but knew he would hate himself if he abandoned her trust, to do the one thing she pleaded against. With a few more powerful strokes he withdrew himself and his climax came violently. His seed spattered against her rear, letting the warm viscous liquid drip down her backside and thighs until it dripped down her sex and into her own pool below. They were panting, gasping for air as she gently collapsed to her side beneath him.

“Thank you.” Was all she said.

“We are a mess. Let me run a bath for us.” His legs were shaky and his body felt tired and heavy but he managed to stand and shrug off the rest of his breeches before pumping water into the tub.

She gathered her robe to clean the pool of sex from the floor and threw it into her laundry basket. Pushing herself off the floor with trembling arms she sat on the floor and tried to palm her hair down.

After a few minutes of filling the bathtub he placed his hand into the water and heated the bath for them. Promptly entering the steamy water he beacons for her to join. Standing from her lounged position on the floor, gathered her hair in front of her shoulder and she slid into the water ahead of him. She lay back against his broad chest, letting him cup the water over her body, washing away the evidence of their night while kissing her neck lovingly. She felt as though she could just fall asleep against him and he felt quite the same.

“So tell me.” He began, “Your little secret?”

“Yes, you found my little secret. And so long as you keep quiet about it, I’ll let you play with it again.”

## Chapter 13

‘Why am I so hot?’

Barely waking from her deep slumber she began noticing how bright the room appeared through her closed lids. Trying to pull the blanket over her head to shield her face from the sunlight was met with resistance as the strong arm draped over her waist clutched her tightly to his chest.

Feeling the scorching heat from his body made her sweaty and uncomfortable; she tried to peel her body away from his but his arm insisted she remain. Defeated and feeling a bit cranky she opened her eyes to see the windows lined with snow. The fire had died down not long ago and the outside chilliness had already begun seeping in through the windows. With the combined heat of the thick blankets plus the furnace-of-a-man radiating heat behind her she felt as though she may need another bath to keep her from smelling of sweat.

She pulled the blanket up to let the cold air suck in underneath, cooling herself but eliciting a groan from Fen’Harel. “I need to get up.”

“No.” His grip on her tightened.

“I need to open the clinic.” She tried pulling away but his arm held her down.

“No.”

“Also breakfast.” Grabbing at the edge of the bed in hopes of gaining some leverage to pry out of his arms was ultimately fruitless when he rolled over to face the opposite side of the bed, bringing her along for the ride.

“No.”

She lay there for another minute, trying to think of a way to get her day started without having to drag a naked man from one point to another.

She twisted around in his grasp until she was directly facing him, not really sure what step two should be. His face twisted slightly, illustrating his displeasure at being jostled awake again but once she stopped moving he relaxed and affectionately rubbed his head against hers.

“I need to...”

“No.”

He smiled, eyes still closed as he wedged his face between hers and the pillow. “Aren’t you going to ask me what you need to do to get out of this?”

“No.”

“Why not let your apprentice take over for the day?”

“No.” She squirmed in his grasp in an effort to get free; while he did not want to keep her there forcefully he did make himself an inconvenience to her endeavor.

She ducked underneath the blankets and wiggled her way below his arms, freeing herself to now search for a way out of the hot prison of blankets.

“We could have a day to ourselves.”

“No.” he chuckled at her muffled response beneath the blanket. Crawling over his body while trying to find the opposite side of the bed she found the edge of the blankets and poked her disheveled head out to quickly inhale the cool air.

“I’m sure your Jun can handle a few slips and bruises. Let me spoil you.” He hissed as she let the cold air flood under the blanket. She stood up and pulled her hair back and out of her face, walking naked and cold towards the fire place to restock the flames.

“No.”

He turned himself to lie on his back, watching her go about her normal morning routine sans clothes. “A popular word today...”

Sitting before her vanity she began brushing her hair, knowing well Fen’Harel was watching her work. She put on a small show to tease him, painting her lips red slower than usual, dusting her body, spending a little more effort on rubbing the powder onto her breast, he caught on to her game very quickly.

He laced his fingers together and placed them behind his head, propping his head up as he watched casually as she clad herself in a thick winter dress.

As she began fastening the tops of her stockings to the clasps on her garter belt she heard him hum a soft approval. “Nice, but those won’t keep you warm.”

She could already feel the regret flooding her mind but she asked anyway, “What am I to do then?”

“Not wear them of course. In fact I would suggest slowly removing all your clothes and get back into bed with me. Much warmer.”

“Slowly huh?” The sarcasm in her voice was hard to mask but she couldn’t help the small tug at the corners of her lips as she walked over to the bed.

“Or just rip them off, which ever suits you.” She sat down on the bed, smiling down at his reclined figure while shaking her head. “Is that a command from a God or a request?”

He knew she was being playful, but did not enjoy the concept of lording over her for sex as though she was a slave, but he echoed her lighthearted expression “A request of course...” She grabbed a pillow and hit him in the head before standing up and laughing as she made her way to the door.

Tossing the pillow aside he sat up and called after her, “I suppose I’ll just have to take care of myself until this evening!” Pulling up the sheets to warm his cold torso he heard her call from the stairway, “You do and you’ll be the one washing my linens!”

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The cold had sent many of the villagers to her clinic, anything from icy slips to delusional sicknesses had appeared on her doorstep. This day was the busiest she had in many months and just when it felt as though she could not take in one more patient a man rushed to her clinic, calling her to an emergency.

“It’s my wife! I-I think she’s in labor!”

Dahlia stood up from her position before a young boy, soothing his sprained ankle and noted a dozen people trying to filter into her small clinic from the vestibule. “Of course she is...” she was absolutely exhausted. Her magic was near depletion and her head throbbed as she staggered into her mixing room and began gathering mixes and supplies while she let a small blue vial carry from her

lips.

Jun was in better condition despite working just as hard. “Aw, I want to go! Baby ears are so cute when they’re first born!” claimed Jun as she tended to the young boy in Dahlia’s stead. ‘I hate this! I hate delivering babies! I hate you and you and you!’ Her mind felt as though it were on fire. Not only was she going to have to go out into the cold, she was going to deliver a baby, and that could take hours. She was going to be filthy, grumpy, and absolutely exhausted by the time she came back.

Before she followed the impatient man she stopped by the kitchen and picked up a few apples and walked upstairs to her bedroom. Peeking inside she saw him reading on her bed and tossed the apples to him. “I’m going to be late. If you can cook I would suggest doing so since I don’t know when I’ll be back.” And without saying another word she left him to his reading.

Gathering into the back of his cart the man immediately began urging the nag faster on the icy roads, much to the chagrin and lecture of Dahlia who sat helplessly in the back. Once they reached the village and raced up the stairs to their apartment she found his wife walking back and forth in the hallway, clutching her stomach. ‘Great, all that hurrying just to wait.’

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Four hours had passed and not much progress was made for the woman. Dahlia simply sat on a small stool in the corner of the room, elbows on her knees and head in her hands, watching the poor woman walk back and forth through the frame of the doorway. This was the last thing she wanted to do today, or any day for that matter. Her mind drifted back to her and Fen’Harel’s antics last night and she took solace in letting her mind roam.

‘That weird bastard can’t be Fen’Harel. He’s supposed to be this incredible being. This awesomely powerful man who can fell an army with wit and strength. Right now he’s sitting in my bed, reading bad romance novels because a bear beat his ass...’ Trying to make sense of this whole situation was just bringing up more questions. Hearing the woman give out a small cry, she looked out the window to see the sun was beginning to set. The time was getting closer, but she anticipated she wouldn’t return home until early in the morning. Now her thoughts were drawn towards the helpless husband who had been assisting his wife in walking; she raged inside at his premature alarm, but she conceded his panic was justified in this particular situation.

A few more hours had passed and the progress was almost coming to an end when a knock at the door was heard. There have been a few times in her life she could recall she was absolutely elated to see Jun. In her hand she had a basket which held a loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese and a bottle of wine.

The girl was an angel.

“Dolly, I brought something for you to eat. I brought a little cake too!” she held up a small box and sat down next to her on the floor. “You just want to play with baby ears...”

Jun let out a little giggle telling her she wasn’t completely wrong. “I also thought I should learn more about this sort of thing. I only got to be apart of maybe two other births before now.” She uncorked the bottle and placed it on a cloth she laid on the floor before breaking up the bread. They sat together and ate their fill of the fresh bread and cheese when it came time for action as the woman’s painful contractions became one large pain.

Dahlia instructed Jun and the new parents as best she could, ‘Damn it Jun! Just when I was so happy with you, you go and get me drunk.’ She was coherent at least and she gave her commands clearly as the woman pushed. After a few minutes the babe was born, messy and writhing in the

cool air of the room, making little crackling sounds as it used its mouth for the first time. Jun's mouth however would not shut it seemed, she was always in awe of what she called the miracle of birth, something her and Dahlia did not share a similar opinion. Showing Jun how to properly hold a newborn baby as she cleaned it was more of an exercise in keeping Jun for distraction or snatching the baby from her arms. After a few minutes they gave the newborn to their eager parents, gave their advice before gathered up their supplies and making their way into the streets.

Outside Jun had tied Naug'seus up to a light pole, seeing as how Dahlia was without any other means of returning home, she thanked the girl had enough foresight to help her this evening. Dahlia looked down at her clothes and saw them to be absolutely filthy from blood and afterbirth but shrugged it off as she gave Jun a ride home before heading to her own. The air was so cold it felt as though knives were peeling at the skin on her face, she wasn't sure whether she could take the ride slowly to keep the wind chill at a minimum or dart home as quickly as possible. Deciding against the faster choice she arrived home in the early hours of the morning cold and tired. She brought the horse back to the stable and removed the gear as quickly as she could before making a bare-footed dash into her home through the back kitchen door. The warmth of the stone in front of the kitchen hearth hurt her feet at first but as the heat sunk in it was better than anything she had felt before. She saw her knives had been used to chop some produce she had and assumed he already ate his fill before retiring for the night. She walked upstairs and quietly opened the door to find him sitting on the bed, waiting for her.

He laughed at her, "You look as though you had seen a messy battle."

She rolled her eyes as she walked to her vanity, pulling on the strings behind her to loosen her dress. "Birth or battle, there's blood in both." He walked behind her and began gently pulling at the strings before letting the dress slid down her body. "And I'm starting to run out of good clothes." He pressed his nose into her hair and could immediately smell the sweat of the day and a hint of wine on her breath. He smiled as he walked her to the ready bath he drew for her. All she wanted to do was fall asleep in the hot bath, letting him wash her hands and feet, but once he was finished he let the water drain, gathered her up, and placed her in the warm sheets.

"You are resting tomorrow." He said as he gathered her wet body into his arms and cradled her underneath the blankets.

Eyes closed and quickly falling into slumber, her last words before she fell were, "Make me."

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Despite her exhaustion she awoke before dawn, feeling surprisingly affectionate and aroused with the sleeping man before her. Placing small kisses on his lips and neck he began stirring from his sleep, eagerly wanting to return the warmth. The sex they had that morning was slower than before; he savored the light touches and spoke gentle words he would tell no other. Her moans were soft and were matched by his as their duet continued until the light of the dawn began creeping into the room.

She lay atop him in post-coital bliss, resuming the sleep she had before. He was awake however, brushing his hand up and down her body, stroking her like a cat; he found his mind drift back to his obligation to the pantheon. He wanted more of this, more time with her, but he was pulled strongly by his sense of duty.

His anger flared, his breathing shallow and quick as he held her sleeping body tightly in his arms.



## Chapter 14

### Chapter Notes

Massive writers block, sorry for the wait.

As the days went on fewer and fewer villagers came to the clinic. With the sudden frost wilting and killing most of the herbs Dahlia needed she was forced to decrease her admittance to only emergencies in order to stretch out her supply between the vendor's visits. Sending Jun and Yanos away until the frost melted allowed her and Fen'Harel many hours alone in the empty house. While they enjoyed each others company and playful distractions, Fen'Harel tried to concoct a plan to retrieve his Orb. In his dreams he sought out Mythal once more.

"I concede." He began, "I will use her as a means to an end." He had to convince himself there was no other way to proceed. His face fell to the floor; his eyes betrayed their torment to his friend as he confessed. "But I lost the trail. I don't know where they are." He slowly walked towards her, his face remained focused on the floor as she drew him into her arms in a loving embrace.

"I can tell you where to go, but I cannot help you. Elgar'nan has allowed you this; a chance at redemption." He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face into her shoulder.

"He would not care if I succeed or fail. But..." he shook his head, "Dahlia. She is too weak a mage to defend herself." She placed her hands over his ears and pulled his head from her shoulder; he simply closed his eyes and waited for her response.

"I will tell you where your prey is. Just let her be your eyes on the inside and find their weakness." She stroked the short hair on the side of his head in an attempt to soothe his frustrations. "Please. Trust me, and trust her."

He awoke with a jolt so fierce Dahlia sat up in a panic.

"What?! Is the horse out?" She was in a daze. Hair mussed and her sleep gown falling off her shoulder she looked back at Fen'Harel for answers. He gave a small wave and motioned her to return under the blankets. She gave out a long breath before falling back into her pillows, trying to curb the sudden rush to allow her to fall back asleep. Fen'Harel gathered her in his arms once more and decided tomorrow would be when he set his plan in motion.

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They stood alone in her mixing room, him sitting on the chaise while she continued to grind dried leaves into a fine powder. The awkward silence between them made her anxious. He held and kissed her much like before but there was sadness in his actions. Now that he was fully capable, she could only believe their affair together was slowly coming to an end. With his wounds healed he could easily take care of himself and no longer needed to remain here in her house. She wasn't sure what she was to expect from their relationship, there was no way the Dread Wolf of the Pantheon would be willing to stay locked away outside a village so insignificant you couldn't find it on a map.

She waited for him to break the silence.

“Dahlia.” He called.

She set down her tools and turned around to meet him. He stood up and walked over to her and encircled his arms around her waist, looking down into her eyes filled with worry.

“There is something important I must do.” He leaned down to kiss the top of her head before continuing. “I...I must leave you.” She wasn’t sure if she should be distraught or angry with him. Even with all his kisses and gentle embraces she felt as though she had been betrayed.

She turned her head away from his gaze; the last thing she wanted him to see were the tears welling up in her eyes. “Will... I ever see you again?” The anguish gathering in his chest had weakened him in an instant. She would not look at him, he desperately wanted to meet her eyes but she kept them turned away in fury.

“I don’t know.” His voice quiet, “If...If I survive...”

‘Wait, survive?’ her thoughts latched onto that word, ignoring everything else. ‘He’s going out to die?’

“What do you mean survive? What the hell are you going to do?” She forced her tears back and glared into his eyes.

“I can’t say.”

“You can’t or you won’t?” Her anger was palpable.

“Either! It doesn’t matter which. I-I’m sorry.” He placed a hand on the back of her head and sent a jolt of magic through her spine. Her vision blurred before the dark claimed her and he caught her limp body before she collapsed. He picked her up and placed her gently on the chaise before placing one last kiss on her lips and leaving her in safety.

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She awoke several hours later.

The back of her head felt tender and bruised, but the headache accompanied with it was intense. She pulled her heavy body off the chaise and tried to remember what happened to her. Looking around the black room told her the sun had already set and she lit a candle. Her anger was dampened by the heavy, clouded feeling in her head as she called for Fen’Harel throughout the house. Everything was dark and cold, the house was completely empty.

She stood in the doorway of her bedroom, watching the snow fall outside in large flakes. ‘That asshole!’ So many other insults ran through her mind but she just sat down on her bed in the cold room and silently wept. Once she felt all her tears had run dry she curled up into her blankets and quietly spoke words of encouragement to herself before she slipped into the Fade.

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The Fade never truly felt natural to her. She supposed the reason was due to her inferior talents in magic but the thought of just wondering around in a green, foggy domain held little appeal to her. She could see small glimpses of memories flicker across the fog, but she did not come here to see old memories. She came here to shout.

She yelled his name and screamed in anger; she cursed him and the Pantheon. Even the wisps were fleeing from her rage. When she felt her spirit could yell no more she fell to the ground and sat there in resentment. After a moment she finally collapsed onto her back and stared up at the endless sky. She felt a wave of warmth she had never felt before wash over her body, scattering the fog

from her view. From the hard ground underneath her she could feel the sensation of plush grass growing as massive trees began manifesting all around her. She sat up and watched the ethereal scene unfold around her. The ambient magic which could manifest this scenery had to come from a powerful force. She looked around for the being that could conjure this scene for her and soon her eyes met the golden hue of a tall woman in silken robes and golden hair.

Without thinking she shouted at the fair woman, “Who the hell are you?”

The woman cocked an eyebrow in confusion. She had seen the seclusion of the town she lived and knew that there were many people who did not know the Pantheon like those of Arlathan, but she would demand the same respect from even those ignorant to whom they are.

“I am Mythal.” She looked down upon the white hair woman with disapproval in her eyes. At that moment Dahlia’s anger was immediately replaced with panic. She could not hide the shock on her face as she took several steps back and dropped to her knees.

“I apologize a thousand times!” she wouldn’t lift her head to meet her gaze.

Mythal looked down at her with pity, after commanding her to stand once more she felt as though she were a child standing before her mother. She clasped her hands in front of her and tried to make herself as small as she could before the Goddess.

“You are Dahlia, correct?” She made a small sound, but Mythal knew she understood the gravity of the issue with her presence before her. Rarely did Mythal make house calls to the average man or woman.

“Fen’Harel, he is with you?” Dahlia’s eyes looked to the side before meeting Mythal’s soft stare. She began picking at her fingernails nervously before responding.

“No. I don’t know where he went, my Lady.” She saw the anger flash in Mythal’s eyes, filling her with a need to flee but stood fast and waited for Mythal’s judgment.

“He lied to me.” Mythal said quietly to herself before turning her back on the frightened woman. After a few moments Dahlia spoke up, “A-Am I in trouble for all those bad things I yelled about the Pantheon?”

Mythal was pulled from her thoughts and turned to meet the gaze of the woman who, technically, should not be where she was now.

A small smile on her lips showed her amusement at the poor woman, “No, but considering Fen’Harel did not say where he went is more concerning to me at this moment.” Mythal crossed her arms and closed her eyes in frustration. He left on his own to fight a battle with an entire army. She believed him when he said he would take her with him to steal back the Orb. Here stood two women, both having felt the awful sting of betrayal by the same man. Mythal looked back at Dahlia, determined to see her friend alive again, even if it meant he would be angry with her.

“I will tell you where he is going. And I will tell you why and you will follow him.” The command told Dahlia that there was no debating or refusal. Dahlia bowed her head and listened closely to Mythal’s instructions and committed them to memory.

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Dahlia woke up the next morning in a state of urgency. She began gathering supplies and rushing out to place them into Naug’saus’ saddle bags. Her instructions were clear. She was to travel west, alone, towards an abandoned castle situated on a stone edifice before a large waterfall. She was to

go inside and wait for Fen'Harel and search for a large stone orb with an intricate pattern etched into the surface. She packed food, a blanket, and put on her warm riding leathers before leaving her home towards town.

She stopped and hitched her horse before the small apartment of Jun's and informed her of her trek. She gave Jun the key to her clinic and told she would be back as soon as she was finished. When asked why she was leaving so soon, Dahlia simply said it was an emergency and left Jun with the instruction that all the money she made while she was away was hers to keep and whipped Naug'seus into a sprint before she could ask anything further.

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Naug'seus was a powerful horse to be sure. In areas with thick blankets of snow, he crushed a trail through it with ease. For three days they both made ample progress across the snow into the wetlands. There were no maps she could use and none she could find so she had to rely on asking several traveling merchants for directions; an abandoned castle before a waterfall seemed like something most people would not confuse for another.

The wetlands, true to its climate, were very wet. The roads were so saturate with water she could feel Naug'seus slipping as the road practically slide out from underneath them. This slow crawl through the wet woods added back the time they may have saved on the sprint up, but still they tried quickening the pace on the cobblestone roads whenever possible.

A few more days and both her and Naug'seus were exhausted. They pressed onward from the wetlands and made their way up a steep trail over a mountain of thicket. Once they landed on the other side the woods became dense with skinny white trees with a yellow leaf canopy overhead. They walked at a decent pace on the flat land as she marveled at the serene beauty of the forest.

She heard her stomach growl with hunger and looked around to see if there were any fruit or nut trees before Naug'seus let out a startled scream. He began kicking and thrashing before Dahlia had a moment to react and threw her to the ground. Looking back she could see he had snagged his leg on a rope trap and was desperate to free himself. She got up off the ground and tried making a grab for his reigns before several men with lassos stepped out from behind the trees and from underneath their leaf-covered borrows to ensnare her and Naug'seus. She saw the young men and women try and bring in Naug'seus, however his strength and panic allowed him to toss his captors with ease. Dahlia on the other hand his the ground hard when a lasso wrapped around her neck and jerked her back. Her head buzzed from the sudden shock and her vision tried to focus, but all she saw was Naug'sues thrash about before taking off in a dead run through a line of men, plowing through them with no more resistance than the snow.

"Forget the horse! Take her back to camp." Before she could even try and conjure the magic from her fingers she was struck on the head and blacked out.

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Drifting in and out of consciousness she found herself being carried on the shoulder of a rather tall man before she was tossed onto the ground again. Her vision eventually cleared to reveal a small camp with a few small tents circling a decent sized campfire. She felt some gentle hands sitting her up and pulling her back away from their captors. She looked back to see several men and women, dirty and afraid, each one bound with rope on their wrists. Looking down she saw that she was in the same predicament as they and knew exactly what was happening.

"Slavers, huh?" No one answered.

Looking back towards the fire she saw three young men, elvhen like them, watching over their chargers, or watching her specifically.

She felt concussed, her head pounded and her thoughts were barely holding water when she heard on the men call out to her. "I bet that hurt. Good thing you didn't put up much of a fight like that nag. Would've been great to have a horse that nice, yeah?"

The sound of his voice felt like knives raking across porcelain, "If you wanted to fuck a nag you could have just stayed home with your sister." She didn't care about the beating she was going to get. Perhaps that was the concussion talking.

The other two men found the jab a bit hilarious at their partner's expense. Fuming, he stood up and walked over to her and grabbed a fist full of her hair, forcefully angling her head up towards his face.

"A slave needs to have manners." He said before giving her one swift punch to the face.

She coughed and spit the blood from her mouth on the ground before looking back up at her assailant. "There must have been some misunderstanding..." she tried to spit out a mouthful of blood before continuing. "I meant his sister." She gave a nod over to the other man sitting by the fire.

The other man stood up but was pulled back down to his seat by the third man. Her attacker looked down at her reddened face, sucking on the wound of her swollen cheek before spitting out another mouthful of blood, this time on his foot.

He looked back at his friends and with a smirk called out to them, "Perhaps I should break her in for her new master, eh? Give that smart mouth of hers a cork..." One man just shook his head and called back, "Don't do that, you know she's just going to bite it off."

Dahlia brought up her bound wrists to wipe the blood from her chin before pointing to the man by the fire, "He's smart. I would listen to him." He looked down and pulled a dagger from his belt and angled it just under her throat bringing her face up to meet his.

"The instant I feel teeth, you die."

"That doesn't matter to me, asshole! I may be dead but there is not a mage alive that will be able to put your dick back on."

The men behind him were laughing. "Sit your dumbass down! She'll make a choirboy out of you!" He took one last look back down before putting his dagger back in its sheath and stomped back to the warmth of the fire.

She sat back and closed her eyes. She wasn't sure how much abuse her face could take, but for now she decided to remain quiet. She stayed awake all night and when it finally came time to pull up camp and move out she and the other hostages were bound together by a rope leash and lead along the path by subjugators.

They walked a full day with no rest before leaving the forest to behold their new prison. In the valley they could see the tall gold grass surrounding the road to a frightening and majestic scene. There was a gorge with a long bridge extending out to a fortress surrounded by an incredible wall of water. The mist flew up and filled the canyon, masking how far the water fell.

She was closer to her destination than she realized, but there was a problem. The fortress was to be abandoned, yet it was clearly in use.

'Had Mythral lied to me?'



## Chapter 15

The sound of the waterfall as they walked across the bridge was almost deafening. As the iron gate rose to permit them entry a sudden feeling of dread and panic flooded their bodies as they crossed the threshold. Inside the stone ruin were several campsites occupying almost every inch of the courtyard. Tents, campfires, all surrounded by gangs of bandits, slave catchers, and other sorts of marauders and unsavory persons. The tug of their rope leash directed them around towards the back where the slave tents were nestled. Dilapidated leather tents were guarded by some of the largest men in camp, no doubt to deter runners.

They were led to a rough dirt area where several large wooden posts were displayed. To each post a man or woman were bound and it was here that they were officially made into slaves. Dahlia watched the first few being bound to the post before a rather distinguished looking man approached them with a large wooden bowl in hand. His dark hair slicked back and the polished rings in his ears glistened in the light of the fading sun. He had an air of arrogance and power unlike anyone she had ever seen; she wasn't sure if he was in charge of this band of criminals but she watched him carefully regardless.

He passed the bowl to a young man beside him, a skinny lad with bandaged fingers, and pulled a thin blade from his belt. Perhaps blade was too general a term, it held no sharp edge and tapered off to a fine point. A pick seemed more suitable.

A guard who had followed the powerful man out drew his blade and positioned it underneath the first bound man's chin. As the powerful man drew his pick he began looking over the man briefly.

"You have the look of a blacksmith. Is that correct?" The man nodded as best he could with the blade pressed against his neck.

"Then perhaps June will find appeasement in your new work." He approached the man with the small pick and began carving into his face. The man's agony could be heard bouncing off the high stone wall of the castle until the powerful man withdrew his hands to reveal the etched pattern across his bleeding face. The young man held the bowl out to his master and he grabbed a small cloth, saturated in ink and wiped it across the bleeding face of the grimacing man.

The act was horrifying and the others began to cower as far away from the man as they could. This ritual was repeated on each new slave, being assigned their roles and marked with a symbol of the Pantheon Gods. When it was finally Dahlia's turn at the stake she dug her heels into the ground like a stubborn mule. She was promptly beaten by two of the guards and bound to the post like the others.

The powerful man looked her up and down, sizing her up, and after giving a quizzical look, asked her "You wear leathers like a hunter, but you have no weapons or belts. What were you before now?"

Dahlia may not know very much about slavery, but it didn't take much to know the rules of the game. If she said she was a mage they may want to stifle that ability, permanently. If she said she were a healer they would realize soon enough she was a weak healer and may just find another use for her if they didn't just kill her to free up some room.

"I will not ask again." The guard pressed his blade firmly against her throat. She needed inside the castle, Mythal made that clear. She had a free ticket unlike the rest; she had the option to place herself in any spot in the castle with a reasonable lie.

The powerful man turned his head towards the guard in a silent agreement before Dahlia blurt out, “Cook!”

The man turned to face her again and gave her a puzzled look. “You were a cook? Then why are dressed like a hunter? And why were you riding so far from any village?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to maintain eye contact with her would-be executioner.

“The sudden frost killed too many of the crops to the east. I came west looking for another village to trade with.”

It was a brilliant lie in her mind. The cold had come early in the east and being a cook allowed her some access the castle. But would he be convinced? He took another moment before brandishing the pick once more, wiping the blood from the others off the tip using a silken handkerchief.

“Sylaise will be pleased then, as should you. Her mark should leave enough of your pretty face bare.” He grabbed her by the chin and forced her head against the post as he dug the pick into the flesh above her brow before carving it down and around her eye. She gave a cry through her gritted teeth but would not give them the satisfaction of hearing her scream. She remained as silent as she could with each new line until finally the marking was complete. The blood trickled down her face, blinding her eye and further staining her clothes. The sudden slap of the black ink over her eye felt like acid but all she did was groan at the pain. The ink smelt like coal and blood and once the rag was removed from her face she was shaking from the pain as they cut her loose to collapse on her knees before them.

The powerful man just looked down at her, cradling her eye with bound wrists, and smiled.

“You took that better than most.” She looked up at him with pain and anger through her good eye, but his smile just widened. “We do need more kitchen staff so I suppose this will be a suitable start for you tomorrow.” He turned and walked towards the front courtyard, leaving the new slaves to adjust to their hopeless life among the high walls and guards.

A few of the other slaves who had been watching from the tents came out to help the new additions. Unbinding their wrists and presenting them with torn linen scraps to wipe the ink from their faces. Dahlia accepted the help and followed the others back into the tents to rest before they were called to duty tomorrow.

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Dahlia was shook awake by a pair of very lithe hands; she sat up and placed a hand over her face to feel the wound scabbing over. Looking up to see a young girl standing over her, she was pulled up from her bedroll on the ground and promptly handed a new set of clothes and apron.

“Please hurry.” She said in a loud whisper. “We have to start preparing the meals before dawn breaks.”

Dahlia began eagerly dressing herself in her new slave attire and quietly walked around the other sleeping bodies and followed the young maid to the back entrance to the kitchen.

The kitchen was very large with several hearths positioned all around and several chopping tables lined with utensils and vegetables. The young girl grabbed her by the hand and led her to the dicing table and began working on immediately on dicing the vegetables, motioning Dahlia to join. For hours they chopped vegetables, kneaded dough, stirred vats, and baked breads. There were always a guard or two posted inside the kitchen and it made sneaking bites of food almost impossible. By



the look of the other slaves with her they were pale and very thin, so food either came from scraps or nothing at all.

The few instances Dahlia could leave the kitchen were when she brought food out to the mercenary bands and when setting the table for the more important figures in the dinning room. There were barely any food scraps left afterwards and so they had to spread what little they could among a dozen or so other slaves; some days some of the others wouldn't get to eat at all.

For the next few days Dahlia grew bitter. She felt used; her tattoo throbbed and stung when the sweat from her brow ran into the fresh wound, reminding her further of what she was now. Her anger laid mostly at the feet of Mythal for her deception. Perhaps this was Mythal's punishment for sleeping with Fen'Harel, but that made little sense. Each night she lay her head down on the cold, hard ground, wrap her body in the rough blanket and hoped she could find a way to escape the next day.

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Fen'Harel had been walking the thick woods surrounding the castle for a little more than a week now. While out maneuvering the hunters were trying at times they never seemed to climb the mountain side for fear of game too ferocious to bring down. He had set up a humble camp in a cave on the cliff side. The path leading up was narrow for the hunters and they agreed that there was no suitable game to be had in the area, which made it the perfect hiding spot to overlook the valley and castle entrance without alerting anyone to his presence.

He foraged food from plants and trees and occasionally caught small game, such as hares to eat while he tried to figure a way into the fortress. He felt no energy from the Orb and that told him the thief was either too weak to unlock the power within, or simply couldn't. Even with this knowledge he knew the fortress was too heavily guarded to storm it alone. He couldn't ascertain their numbers or their military strength just by watching the hunters or staring at the high walls of the castle. He was growing anxious with each passing day.

At night he could get a little closer to the bridge as he stalked the outside as the wolf. As much as he tried to gain information about the castle and its occupants, he simply couldn't without being inside. His frustration grew each day. For every day he couldn't find a way in was another day his enemy had the Orb. The stress began to cloud his judgment and soon he began stalking the scouts at night and leaving them a bloody mess to be found by those in the morning. He killed as many as he could to try and draw them out, but they were careful with their numbers and began sending fewer scouts out at night instead.

He paced his den, trying to come up with a plan to supply him with new information. He needed to know their numbers, he needed to know who was commanding the forces, and he would take anything at this point.

His thoughts were forced back when he heard the sound of crunching leaves below his cave. He dropped low to the ground and moved towards the entrance, listening as the crunching sound persisted. No hunter would make such loud noises, but if there was a chance that a large game animal were close to his camp then he needed to make sure the hunters wouldn't think of this area as prime hunting grounds for his sake. He peaked over the edge of the cliff to see a large horse sniffing around the bushes. The grey horse had a pack saddle and ropes draped over its neck, but no rider.

'Did he escape his owner?' he thought. 'Perhaps one of the guards or hunters lost him.' He looked around, listening for anyone to come running up to claim this horse, but the area was naturally quiet. He quietly came down from the cliff side and gently approached the horse as nonthreatening

as possible. The horse made eye contact with this stranger, perked his head up and pawed the ground, ever wary of this new outsider.

Fen'Harel saw the long trail of rope lassos hanging from his neck yet he had a bridle and bit still in his mouth. As he came closer the horse took a step back but Fen'Harel grabbed the reigns before he could flee. The steed gave a little fight for the stranger, but eventually gave up and allowed his new master to lead him. Fen'Harel tied him to a tree and began taking off all the ropes around his neck and the one attached to his back fetlock. He searched the saddlebags and found they were mostly empty aside from a few items. A small water bladder and a thick bedroll were all that could be salvaged so he took the gear off the horse and let him shake his body at the wonderful feeling of being free after so long. Fen'Harel let the horse free and took the gear up to his camp in order to hide it from anyone who may stumble upon it and try looking for the owner.

The horse however would not leave the area. He grazed among the trees and that made Fen'Harel feel uneasy. Taking out the water pouch and bedroll he decided he could make use of them since he barely had any supplies of his own. He opened the bedroll and laid it beside the small fire he fed deep towards the back of the cave. He kept hearing the small echo of the horse marching slowly through the dry leaves outside which only made him anxious at the possibility of masking the sounds of intruders. He fed the fire a few small branches and sat down on the plush, fur-lined bedroll, taking a moment to try and devise a new strategy of assault.

The sun began setting and Fen'Harel decided that now was the appropriate time to catch a few hours sleep before he began his night stalking. He laid his head down on the warm blanket and his eyes flew open at the familiar smell of the bedroll. He pressed his nose closer to the soft fur and inhaled the familiar scent of sunflowers and roses.

He stood up at the realization of whose bedroll this belong to, whose horse that was, and anger-inducing realization of why that horse was tied with lassos and rider-less.

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He raced through the woods as the wolf, chasing the scent of the horse in hopes of finding hers once more. Following the horses trail to the mountain on the opposite side of the valley he found a tiny, lingering scent of her as well as some blood and several other people.

He followed the faint scent to an abandoned campsite where he found the scent of her blood to be more potent. He snarled at the camp and followed her trail back to the valley, leading right to the guarded bridge of the fortress.

'No! How? How could she be here?' He felt sick with fury. He wanted to run across the bridge and storm the castle within, but what little sense he had left said he would not survive and that meant her doom as well. He ran back to his cave and sat before the embers on the bedroll. The knot in his throat made it difficult to breathe comfortably, but he tried to calm himself to help him think clearly. He had to know she was okay; he had to know how she managed to follow him, but in order to find that out he had to sleep.

He had to find her in the Fade.

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It was the most difficult sleep he had to induce, but he finally managed it and began immediately following her scent as the wolf. Sprinting through the Fade, following the faint trail of her scent until her smell became more potent the closer he was. When he finally found her she was sitting alone before a small pool of water, running her fingers through the tips of her hair. He saw the simple dress she wore, especially compared to the soft weaves she wore before, and her legs and feet wrapped in dirty bandages to help avoid the cold. He reverted back to his natural being and

with light steps walked quietly towards her.

She felt the foreign presence of another being and turned to meet the intruder. When she saw him she wanted nothing more than to run to him in defeat, to cry tears of happiness and sorrow onto his chest, but she just sat there and watched him walk towards her.

When he finally stood beside her he grabbed her by the arm and gently lifted her up to meet him. She felt homely and vulnerable as he brushed the hair from her face, she couldn't look him in the eyes so she just stared down at his chest as the heat from her eyes threatened to spill hot tears onto her cheeks. He was screaming inside when he saw the tattoo etched over her eye, marring the face he had come to adore on the woman he was trying to protect. She still would not look at him, he felt the chilling coldness of her demeanor penetrate his body like a knife and all he felt he could do was kiss her forehead and apologize profusely, pleading for her forgiveness.

She pushed him away from her and with all the strength she could muster, smacked him across the face. He remained steadfast before her, stunned but unwavering as he watched her shake her head in abject disapproval of him.

"You must have lost your damn mind!" She screamed at him, balling her fists as she tried to contain her fury.

Realizing the peril she was in made him beg for answers. Why was she here? How did she know where he was?

"Mythal!" Still maintaining the volume and anger to her voice, "She told me to come here!"

Mythal.

The thought that his closest friend would send her to the slaughter made him sick with fear and contempt. She knew he deceived her and she sent Dahlia here to ensure she would be placed in that castle. Dahlia could see the distress of their predicament play over his features. She was angry, but a slap across the face in the Fade would do little to convey that. She wanted to see him again. She wanted to see him outside this wistful wasteland and slap him again. Harder.

"So," she began in a voice more calm than before, "what do I do now?"

## Chapter 16

Dahlia told Fen'Harel everything she knew. She gave him an estimate of the number of men behind the wall and it was much larger than he originally anticipated. While the Orb had not been seen yet she had heard some talk among the bandits about the Orb and its former master.

"They think you are this crazy monster and their Lord stole your power from you." She mused, remembering her smirk at the thought of him being something so terrifying when just a few weeks ago he would be lying in bed, looking like a kicked puppy, every time she had to get dressed for work.

"Their Lord, have you seen him?"

"I don't think so. The only notable figure I've seen is a man named Emeel. He's the one who... branded us." She watched as the words filled his face with seething hatred for a man who showed no remorse turning people into property with nothing more than ink and rope.

"I have seen nothing inside that said 'incredible power' to be honest. I have yet to see another mage and the entire system inside feels as though it's held together by fear."

"Fear? As they should." With determination set in his eyes he paced the area before her, thinking to himself about how they were to proceed. She sat down in her former position and tried to mine through her memories and see if there was anything more he could use.

"I hear them talk sometimes about how their Lord commands such a horrific power. Their fear doesn't seem to be you so much as the Orb he carries."

That comment felt wrong to him. They should be afraid of him returning and slaughtering everyone, as he would want to do, but they were afraid of the Orb and this Lord. "I have felt no power emit from the Orb since it was stolen."

"So the Lord is using the Orb as, what? Is he bluffing? Does he even have the thing?" The bandits and slave runners had pledged loyalty to this Lord for fear of incurring the wrath of God, but if that power was nothing but fiction, then what?

"Mythal would not send us to this place if she wasn't sure they had it. But..." he paused, mulling over his words and thoughts, trying to make sense of this Lord and army. "...perhaps he cannot unlock it." He shook his head at the idea a person would intentionally keep something so dangerous despite the inability to use it.

"If he can't use it, why keep it?" She asked.

"Because if he tried to return it I would kill him."

"If he tried to peddle it, or if he lost it, you or that army would kill him for putting them before the wrath of the Pantheon." Coming to this epiphany made him both happy and fearful.

"The Orb has become his prison and key. His only options would be to either die or find a way to unlock the power inside without letting anyone know he is without." That would mean bringing in more powerful allies or mages in an attempt to tap into that power and then there would be nothing short of the Pantheon to wrestle that Orb from this Lord.

He sat down next to her with a heavy thud and drew her into his lap; this time she let him hold her

now that the tension and frustration gave way to logic and understanding. The little information she gave him was what he needed after all this time testing the unknown. He hated to admit, but she was exactly who he needed at this time and Mythral was right. That did not make the thought that she could be killed or raped at any moment leave his mind, and so they had to work quickly in figuring out a plan to release her and recover the Orb. He nuzzled her face and kissed her softly for what felt like hours until the night was through and the new day demanded she become a slave once more.

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Dahlia felt slightly rejuvenated after last night, but the danger was ever present. Fen'Harel could not protect her and so she tried to make herself blend in with the other slaves as much as possible, taking her lashings and doing her work with little more than a "Yes, my Lord."

As the day faded away and dinner would be finished soon, she volunteered to assist the small young woman set the dinner table for the Lord and his advisors. The young girl was either nervous or fatigued, or perhaps both, since her hands were shaking so bad she had trouble gripping things with her fingers and clutched bowls of food or silverware to her chest so she wouldn't drop anything.

"Are you alright, da'len?" she inquired. Talking among slaves was almost nonexistent since this behavior could be seen as a prelude to rebellion to the guards who were paranoid. Aside from talking about orders and work, simple chatting was developing camaraderie and therefore strongly discouraged. But the young girl couldn't have been more than sixteen years old and she looked up at Dahlia like a child to her mother with tears welling up in her eyes.

"No." Her voice and breathing were shaky and quiet. "I don't like being here. They look at me and I..." her voice froze and she let the tears stream down her face. The panic this girl felt just being in this room would make her an easy target for those who would prey on such a frail young girl.

It broke her heart to see such a young an impressionable girl, stained by this corruption, who may take years to recover if she ever left this place. Just then an idea popped into her head. She may be putting herself right in the lion's den, but the information discussed here could be invaluable. She looked down into the red eyes of the girl; face marred by the same markings as her and gave her soft words of encouragement. "It will be alright." She whispered. "I know that is not what you want to hear and it doesn't help now, but you will be alright."

Just then a sudden crack from a short leather strap hit Dahlia on the tender flesh on her back.

"What are you talking two talking about?" The guard yelled with booming authority in his voice as he grabbed a fist full of her hair and wrenched her head back.

'What is it with these assholes pulling my hair?'

She let out a breath of disgust and looked the guard in the eye, "I was just telling the girl to run back to the kitchen, I will be pouring the wine tonight." The young girl's eyes went wide with shock and happiness, but the guard continued.

"You are not in a position to make that call woman!" The grip on her hair was tightening and it felt as though he could pull the scalp from her skull.

"The girl can barely hold the silverware! The second she spills the wine on the Lord I'll be called to do her job anyway! Send the girl back to stir and let them grope me for an evening, she's only a little girl!"

"Indeed." A somewhat familiar voice called from behind them. As the hand in her hair removed

itself promptly she turned to see the same man who gave her the mark of Sylaise upon her arrival.

“I’m sure the Lord would like to keep the table clear of spills this evening. Escort the girl back to the kitchen and return to your post.” The man gave a slight bow and grabbed the girl forcefully by the arm and led her back to the kitchen.

The man sat down towards the head of the table and raised his empty glass, a silent command to pour his wine before the others arrived. She grabbed the crystal wine decanter and quietly poured his wine before she heard the shuffle of the heavy footsteps of the other guests approach the hall.

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So these were the men and women who obeyed the Lord of this castle.

Aside from the venomous man she met before, the others were clearly the leaders of their respected groups before coming together underneath a single banner. These people have seen battles both horrendous and bloody and even Dahlia could feel the tension in the air between the parties, no doubt it was little more than trust issues between each leader but Dahlia stood away from the table and only made her presence known when the glasses were low.

She watched the glasses closely while listening to their nonsense and began getting a general feel for each member’s temperament. Mostly chest-thumping and sharing battle stories were all they spoke, but Dahlia occasionally took a glance at the Lord sitting at the head of the table.

Lord Mar, as he was called, barely spoke to anyone other than the man who performed the ritual vallaslin markings. Dark brown hair was pulled over his shoulder and left to fall on his chest. His robe of dark blue silk had opened enough to show his bare chest and several hair-chain necklaces draped at various lengths down his chest. He was the very picture of regality and he would clearly present himself as nothing less. But most importantly, the one thing he had that made him appear more powerful than even the most battle-wizened warrior at this table was the large black globe he rolled along his thigh.

‘The Orb.’ It looked remarkable to say the least, but had she not known what it was it would almost seem like nothing more than a piece of artwork some rich noble would flaunt to company. But it was clear everyone in the room knew what it was and what it could do. Dahlia, felt like a backwoods idiot in her ignorance of what appeared to be common knowledge but she had little time to think to herself at that moment.

As the leaders laughed and traded stories she quietly stepped between their seats to briefly refresh their wine glasses before disappearing to the corner of the room. Every now and then she would find herself on the receiving end of the drunken hands of a leader, but she quickly shuffled back to her spot once her job was complete. Thinking about the poor young girl who served these people every day was enough to make her sick.

Feeling bored after hearing the same stories being told for the seventh time she looked about the room and made mental notes of the décor and layout. The whole fortress had been abandoned for many years before its current use and the stonework showed heavy signs of neglect. Overall the castle was modest at best and deserved little ceremony.

Her eyes looked around at the various decorations and only found flowers and scented oil dishes placed on various pillars to help mask the smell of mildew and stale air. But in several vases she saw a floral arraignment that included the stalk of a very rare and ominous plant.

Felandaris. This plant was dangerous to have and some poor slave probably thought the spiked stems and look of death among the otherwise beautiful flowers would make a fine metaphor for the

mercy of this Lord's growing empire. Dahlia could barely help being a mage of small talent but when it came to plants and alchemy she was unrivaled, at least in her village.

Felandaris when fresh could be an incredibly useful poison that could leech the life from a person, but the effects would only last for so long. No, she needed to think about the side effects and how to prolong them. To fell an entire army, or at least weaken them, she needed to find a way to affect everyone at once. Poisoning the food would be best, but she would need more than felandaris and a way to introduce it into everyone's meals.

The leaders each took their leave of the dinning hall after the Lord announced his retirement to his chambers and so began the arduous task of cleaning the tables and dishes before being released to their tents.

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Dahlia paced the Fade waiting for Fen'Harel to show while pondering what she could do with the felandaris plant, assuming she could even obtain it without alerting any of the guards. After an hour or so Fen'Harel appeared through the mist and approached her warmly. After exchanging a long kiss she began telling him what she saw that day and how she was trying to find an efficient use for the plant she found.

For the first time in weeks he was optimistic about recovering the Orb. He pulled her down to the ground and pulled her to his body, letting her lay her head on his chest as they relaxed for a moment to ponder their options. There was little on hand for her to use besides the poisonous plant and she felt as though she could claw the hair from her head. She was overlooking something critical, something perhaps obvious. Pairing off the herbs in her head she could come up with several different ways to make an effective poison, but without any of those plants and no way to put it all into everyone's food she just collapsed in frustration against his chest.

He had nothing to offer as enlightenment, he just lay as still as he could and let her think. With the information about the castle and the various figureheads he could begin planning his assault when they were at their weakest; he closed his eyes and began going through some strategies silently. One thing he needed to happen is to sow seeds of distrust among the ranks. They needed to question their Lord about his imaginary power if he couldn't produce it from the Orbs. Us vs. them, divide and conquer, this seemed the best strategy when dealing with a boiling pot of aggressive leaders eager to prove who is strongest.

He smiled to himself, with their combined knowledge they were formidable against this small army. He felt her shift away from his side before he felt a new weight straddling his hips. He opened his eyes to see her peering down at him through half-lidded eyes. He gave her a soft smirk before reaching up to pull her down to his eager lips. The Fade may offer them the chance to be physical when they were apart, but the touches and tastes they experienced were only a reflection on their memories; like tasting a diluted wine they would want for the real thing.

Even still he torn the clothes from her frame as though it were paper and ravaged her body in an angry tempo. He would count her wounds as she rode his body and he promised that for every welt, cut, burn, and bruise placed upon her he would brutally kill a man inside that fortress and they would know why.

She was his; his vhenan.

## Chapter 17

To say that Fen'Harel made life hell for this Lord's army was a gross understatement. He would tear out the throats and hearts of every scout, bandit, or slaver he came across, leaving their bodies almost unrecognizable for whoever had the misfortune of finding them. The bandit leaders spoke often for days about a pack of wolves killing their men and talks of wolf hunts began spreading. Each leader sat and planned their hunts in the comfort and privacy of the dinning hall and unbeknownst to them Dahlia relayed the information at night. Fen'Harel was more than pleased to know the hunter's movements at night and he would set glyphs before the hunting party's paths and maul them when they were stunned. If the hunters were too close to be at an advantage he would lead the chase away or remain hidden in areas where they were not looking. Larger hunting parties were formed to take on the beasts and Fen'Harel would howl so loud that other, shy wolves, would answer his call, ensuring that his foes continued to believe he were more than one.

This plan worked well in the coming days as each leader fought each other constantly, goading and ridiculing over failed hunts and dead men. Even the slaves were beginning to worry about the wolves. Some speculated that these leaders would start using slaves as bait for the beasts and Dahlia saw this to be a fine opportunity to spread rumors and lies among her fellow hostages.

"The Lord," she started, putting on her best fearful expression before continuing. "The Orb he carries belongs to God Fen'Harel! The wolves want it returned to its master! It's a curse!" She spoke loud enough to let the guards hear and after receiving a silencing blow to the back of her head she smiled if not for a brief moment. Sowing that seed of fear would definitely set eyes on Lord Mar and that could only help them.

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Lord Mar paced his chambers while his trusted confidant Emeel sat before the fire, reading a faded tome. After noticing his friend take his seventh turn around the room he quietly closed the book over his finger and watched as his friend continue wearing a path into the rug.

"The same troubles as usual, or is this something new?" Annoyed by the constant distraction from his book, Emeel simply watched his friend take a seat opposite of him in front of the fireplace. Tenting his fingers and watching the fire intensely, Mar finally called out to Emeel for his advice. "That blasted Orb; it may as well be a rock!" He threw himself back into the chair and propped his head up on his fist, eyes still focused on the fire. "What am I missing? What am I doing wrong?" He looked to Emeel for an answer but his friend sat as calm as ever.

Emeel knew he wasn't going to be able to continue his book in peace so he placed a ribbon where his finger held his place between the pages and wedged the book between him and the arm of his chair. "Perhaps the answer lies in the person who wields it, not the Orb itself." Emeel stood up and walked towards the desk where the Orb sat and picked it up before returning to his seat. Mar watched him for a few moments before he held out his hand for the Orb and Emeel was gracious enough to hand it back to him. Turning the globe in his hands, staring at the inlaid pattern, it was a mystifying if not mesmerizing object of power. But even with all their efforts they could not figure out how to use it, how to tap into that power and become a God in his own right.

"You say the answer may lie in the person? What do you mean?"

Emeel watched the Orb closely, analyzing it from a distance before hearing his friend's question. "Well," he drew out the silence as he tried to piece together his thoughts, "What is Fen'Harel? What is he compared to you, besides a God of the Pantheon?" Looking at the problem from this angle brought up some terrifying answers which mostly lead to Mar realizing he had little in



common with the God and he now held in his hand the object of his wrath. Emeel came to the same realization; Mar was neither a mage nor a man of immense power. To understand that the Orb would not respond to anything less was something he dreaded and now he was practically living on borrowed time.

Emeel stood up from his seat and took the Orb from Mar, holding it up to his eyes as he summoned his magic from their hidden depths and tried to pour it into the Orb. Mar watched his friend's hands glow and release silver tendrils of magic to envelope the object. Emeel continued to feed magic into the Orb but when he felt his efforts were getting them no further he stopped his flow of magic, or at least he tried to.

The Orb began to glow a hazy green light while in Emeel's hands, Mar stood up in relative shock at the new development but Emeel was less than thrilled. The magic continued to pour into the Orb despite Emeel's efforts to stop; the Orb was sucking him dry and he collapsed to his knees in exhaustion. Mar tried to grab the Orb from his friend but it held fast to its magical source and Emeel could feel the life begin to drain from his body. With all his strength he managed to break the bond between Emeel and the Orb and wrench it from his hands while the Orb continued to beat with green vigor before it let out a powerful pulse of energy that nearly destroyed the room and threw Emeel and Mar to the ground. A few moments passed as both men lay on the floor in the dark room, the pulse of energy had completely extinguished the fire and the furniture lay overturned and papers were scattered on the floor. Mar tried to steady his body as he crawled up from the floor to see his friend still shaken on the ground, weak and stunned by the power of the Orb.

"The Orb!" Mar yelled, finding the sphere to have landed unharmed between them in the blast, but the Orb lay quietly, no longer pulsing with energy as before. Emeel finally found the energy to stand, although clearly shaken and weak from the ordeal he managed to set his chair upright once more and collapsed into his seat and Mar followed suit with his own chair. Both sat in silence for several minutes, afraid to touch the Orb again until they were certain it was safe.

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The Fade shuttered around them, and for a brief moment there was clarity to their surroundings. In what felt like a passing wave of energy over their bodies, Fen'Harel clutched her tightly to his chest, their moment of closeness spoiled as she heard his breath hitch in his chest. But it wasn't just him; she felt the quake of energy pass over her as well.

"What was that?" remaining still in his arms, her panic began to rise as she noticed him remaining absolutely still. Listening, watching, and feeling for any indication whether the force they felt would return or if this power was just a single pulse.

He realized how he may have looked to her in his moment of panic, so he relaxed his grip and let her move away from his chest.

"That was the Orb."

"Are we in trouble? Is it too late?" She felt a sudden wave of fear hit her hard as she looked to him for answers.

"No. No, I think it was just a small burst of energy." He ran his hand through his hair in vexation. The Orb had remained dormant until now. 'What happened? Why now?'

"You know," she started to say as she readjusted her clothes, "I've been hearing about this Orb for a while now and I have no idea what it is or does." He tried to find the proper words to describe it to her since she wasn't very knowledgeable of the Fade and most magic.

“The best way to describe it would be...” he found the words dying before he had a chance to speak them, “It’s connected to the Fade. Like an object that is trapped between the Fade and the waking world.” Her expression barely adjusted, still waiting for him to go into more detail. “It...It can amplify magic, in a way. It depends on how it’s used, like any other magic.”

“So, what does that mean? I don’t understand what just happened, let alone what the Orb actually does.”

He tried his best to further explain but the impulsive nature of the Orb lead to more questions than answers, “Just know that it takes a malleable mind to control the spontaneous energy within the Orb. That fool Lord probably tried to pry that energy loose.”

“But isn’t that bad? He might be able to use it soon enough, right?” She sat down on the ground and he followed suit. It wasn’t long before Dahlia was pulled from the Fade, shaken awake by the thin hands of the same young girl who use to the pour wine.

“Lady! Please wake up! Something happened in the tower!” Dahlia sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she and the rest of the slaves rushed outside to see most of the guards and bandits rush the castle in a panic.

“There was a loud crash!” the slaves talked among each other, sharing the gossip and watching their captors storm the castle and bark orders to one another. Dahlia watched the relative chaos play out in the back courtyard with the rest of the slaves until the misty rain started falling around them. As they were ushered back into their tents Dahlia saw something flutter against the wall behind their tents. It was too dark to see initially but she could see the long, flowing tendrils of what she quickly identified as rashvine. A quick shove from behind and she was back inside the tent with the others before she could figure out what to do with her new ingredient. Walking back to her bed roll she quietly wrapped herself up in her blanket and pondered to herself about what she could use rashvine for and how to use it in her plans. She knew rashvine often hardened the skin when applied directly on the flesh, but ingesting or even touching it would cause the person to break out in painful rashes; too obvious a plant to use by itself. For an hour she laid there, thinking about her options and what she would need to do to handle this plant carefully. She knew Fen’Harel was probably worrying in his cave or waiting in the Fade for her to return, but she felt so close to an epiphany that she put him out of her mind while she thought.

It was getting close to sun up and she would need to prepare herself for work in a few hours, but first she needed to obtain a portion of that vine. She quietly wiggled out from her blanket and slid underneath the side of the tent to the shadowed area between the wall and their sleeping area. She crouched down low and quietly walked to the last place she saw the vine. She unwrap the bandages around her legs before covering her hands as best she could to prevent any skin from touching the offensive weed. Carefully standing up she ripped a vine from the growth and coiled it up into a small pile before taking the bandages off and wrapping it around the vine to conceal and protect her. She quietly slipped back underneath the tent flaps and crawled her way back to her bedroll. Stuffing the bandage wad through a small hole she ripped on the underside of her pillow she tried to fall back asleep before she was called to work once more.

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The next day was just as grueling before with a small change in pace. The Lord and his advisor demanded to take their meals in his chambers instead of with the other bandit leaders in the dinning hall; no doubt it had something to do with the Orb and that pulse of energy from last night. Dahlia volunteered to stay with the bandits while the young girl brought the Lord their meals, opting for the more taxing job which left her where information would be discussed and left the girl out of groping range. As she worked in the kitchen she watched as she stirred the large pots of stew how

one of the maids would bring old plants and refuse to burn as kindling in the hearth. The smell was different from the regular wood burnt pine she became accustomed to and she watched as the old herbs and rotten food would burn to ash in the fire.

It was then she realized what she could do with her resources, she just needed to get the felandaris from the dinning hall.

After a few hours she began to make her way to the dinning hall as usual to set the table for the leaders. Looking over at the vases of wilting flowers she saw the felandaris was sticking out proudly against the dying blossoms. Once she finished setting the table she began pulling all the wilting flowers from their vases and making her way back to the kitchen; the guards hardly made a fuss about the plants when she proclaimed they were dead and going into the fire.

As she walked down the short hall she broke off a few branches and folded them inside her cloth belt before throwing the rest into the fire. She resumed work as usual with not even another slave any wiser to her plans.

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That night she met with Fen'Harel who had been worrying from the night before about her sudden disappearance. She waved him off and began explaining her plan to him in detail before she would end her Fade visit short.

"Felandaris and rashvine are both equally awful by themselves, but when combined can be a potent mixture if introduced correctly." She began, eager to show him how she could weaken the entire army enough for the long term before he could assault the castle. "If given in small doses at mealtime the effects can be unnoticeable. The rashvine will harden the intestines, preventing nutrition from being absorbed from the food while the felandaris will weaken the host. Over a few days the patients will lose weight, weaken, and essentially starve no matter how much food they eat." Her grin was practically infectious and he smiled proudly back at her. This new element to their plan was exactly what they needed, but his face betrayed his worry as he asked her how she was to introduce this into the food of every bandit and leader inside the fortress.

"All the food is essentially made with the same ingredients, it just depends on how it's presented and to whom. I will burn and grind the weeds together into a powder and place it underneath my fingernails, hopefully I won't expose my fingers so much that they start blistering. But it'll simply look as though I have dirty nails, just like every other slave. Then all I have to do is dig my nails into what ever I dice and throw it in the pots. They can search me as much as they want and they will never find anything. They'll think it's the curse of Fen'Harel and after about a week or so they won't be strong enough to lift a finger." He listened to her plan closely, he knew she could work it and he simply gathered her into his arms like all the nights before and kissed her sweetly, swaying gently side to side.

He drew away from her lips slightly, just enough to speak softly to her, "Please be careful ma vhenan. I need you..." She looked up to him with a pained expression on her face. "What did you call me?" He hugged her to his chest so tight she had to stand on the tips of her toes in order to remain somewhat planted to the ground.

"Ma vhenan, my heart. I will free you soon enough."

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! First off I wanted to apologize for the incredible delay on this chapter, I had to travel out of state for a job interview and I also took this time to visit my parents so I've been a bit busy these last few weeks. I also wanted to thank everyone who commented on my story here, it's been so long since I actually wrote a story that I was afraid this would just be one of those 'for myself' kind of stories, so seeing how some of you are nice enough to tell me you enjoy it and look forward to its continuation is a great feeling and I look forward to not only completing this part of my series, but also creating the next.

Seriously, you guys rock!

I certainly hope you enjoy this chapter and If you will be so kind as to read the chapter notes at the end, just so you know my schedule in these next few months I would greatly appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

With a sweet goodbye she awoke groggy but determined to set her plan into action. She lifted her head up slightly to see if everyone was in fact asleep before pulling out her ingredients. Feeling inside the small tear on the underside of her pillow she pulled out the small bundle of bandages and fished the felandaris from the sash next to her pillow. Pulling the blanket over her head so she could conceal as much of her actions as possible she began concentrating on burning the rashvine and felandaris to ash in her hands. While there was a slight odor and a small light she was certain the other slaves were beyond exhausted to even stir at the small disturbances. Weakened from the days of little food and short sleep she was careful to slowly bring her magic about in order to keep her talents hidden as well as making sure she wouldn't pass out and accidentally set her bedroll on fire.

It had taken nearly an hour of burning and rest but she managed to burn the ingredients into a fine ashen powder. She would be lucky enough in the morning to apply some oil and ground lotus root from the kitchen to her hands in order to quell the blistering from handling the rashvine directly, but right now she could feel her hands becoming red and itchy. Once the ash was gathered in a small handkerchief she began rubbing the ash into the fibers; a dirty handkerchief was a common sight and would be invisible to the guards.

Getting back to sleep was difficult especially with the hot, nagging pain coming from her hands, but she tried regardless. She practiced her excuses in her head, memorizing them for tomorrow and before long the gentle hands of the young girl cautiously nudging her awake signaled the start of the new day and the start of her retribution.

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Fen'Harel stood alone in the Fade, weighing his options before he awoke to continue his own assault on the fortress soldiers. He crossed his arms over his chest and began exchanging the weight of his body from one foot to the other; worry had begun plaguing his mind.

'Her plan is very good, but they will be suspicious regardless of how well she keeps her plan hidden. I need to do more.'

Realizing the Orb had demonstrated a small reaction a few days ago reminded him that even though she did not see anyone openly display any magic, there was definitely a mage in the ranks, one who could get close enough to the Orb to handle it directly.

He concentrated his power to try and feel the presence of this mystery mage inside the Fade. Walking towards the areas where memories collided and congregated had told Fen'Harel that he was center to where the Castle stood. Dahlia had perhaps steered clear of this area in order to remain hidden in the fade but soon he saw new and old memories play out across the valley before him.

Former Kings and soldiers gathered to discuss battle plans one moment and the next were replaced by more recent events. Both were fascinating as well as angering but soon his attention snapped to the presence of another among the foggy memories. Keeping himself hidden he watched a man with dark hair and fine robes walk among the memories in a studious manner. Clearly the man was an articulated person who knew the value of knowledge and power; this was no doubt the man who tried to use the Orb before.

Fen'Harel slowly walked towards the mage, chest broad and posture straight to ensure that this man know exactly who he would be addressing; his response however was uncertain.

"I am not sure if you are a figment of my dreams or the God himself." The man casually walked forward, hands clasped behind his back in an arrogant display of power and lack of concern for the being before him; Fen'Harel did not speak.

"Will you not give me the honor of an answer, my Lord? Or am I to assume you are nothing more than a figment of the Fade and my subconscious." Fen'Harel was seething inside at the sarcastic tone to the title, but he let his outer appearance remain unchanged.

"You are the one who stole from me, a very precious part of my being. How do you expect to live?" Fen'Harel calmly spoke but the venom of his words was not masked from the man.

"I plan to live quite well if you are so curious." He began, "I know that without the Orb your power has severely weakened. You may still be a powerful mage in your own right, but without the Orb you are little different from any other mage. As we stand now, you and I are equals."

"You truly think you understand the power of the Orb already?" Fen'Harel let a small smirk display on his lips, goading the man's curiosity and fear. "It had taken me many years to hone that power, to use it at will; the Orb will only recognize me as its master. The more you toy with it the more you and your men will suffer."

"Idle threats and nothing more. Perhaps you have forgotten your own reputation for deception, I do not fear you nor do I fear the Orb." The man's displeasure could be heard on his voice as well as seen on his face; Fen'Harel needed him to believe that everything that will happen, that everything Dahlia will set into motion was his doing, the Orb's reckoning.

"Believe what you will. But I suppose I should thank you for giving the Orb a try a few days ago, I might not have found you otherwise." If there was one thing Fen'Harel knew it was poking and digging at fear and insecurities, and despite how this man presented himself, like all men of power he had plenty of both.

"It is a shame though that your first attempt didn't give you anything to show for it, perhaps you are not as powerful as you once believed." Watching his tells had told Fen'Harel that his provocations were working; the slight twitch of his nostril, the sudden focusing of his eyes, he was becoming agitated with these insults.

“But that’s not entirely your fault I suppose. It takes an agile mind to overcome the side effects of the Orbs power. The average mage doesn’t have much to offer in regards to true power and authority, but you are welcome to keep trying.”

“Now you’re just boasting, not a very humble God are you? I’m surprised the Pantheon is not here to rectify your mistakes.” Emeel gave a nod towards Fen’Harel, proud of his wits before the trickster God.

“Do you want them to come here too?” Fen’Harel gave a slight tilt of his head as though he were asking in earnest. This made Emeel straighten his spine at the thought of bringing down the wrath of the entire pantheon onto him. That momentary display of fear was what Fen’Harel had been digging for.

“You don’t have to worry about them, yet. If you and your soldiers somehow survive the affects of the Orb I’ll be the only God you’ll meet in the end.” And with one last smirk Fen’Harel appeared to scatter with the fog as though he never existed. Emeel was filled with rage and uncertainty about the exchange and all the while Fen’Harel laughed to himself.

It felt good to play the games again.

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As usual the guards were posted inside the kitchen, watching her and the other staff working on the meals for the day. Walking towards the wash bucket Dahlia rolled up her sleeves and began washing her hands thoroughly before taking out one of her lightly laced handkerchiefs. She made sure to try and press the trace amount of powder underneath her nails before beginning her work on the cutting board. Her hands were burning and had begun turning red on her palms and her fingertips, but other than that not a guard was interested.

With each vegetable she chopped she made sure to dig her nails into the flesh before raking them into the waiting vats. It wasn’t until right before setting the table she could get her hands on the oil and lotus root to help quell her hand’s irritation. Once the day was finished she spent several minutes at night using a cool healing magic underneath the privacy of her blanket to help keep any blistering at bay.

As she lay inside her bedroll that night, before attempting to sleep she lay there and pondered the consequences of her plan. Her concoction would not only slowly poison every soldier and leader, but it would also affect the other slaves and her as well. With the slaves already in a weakened state from malnutrition and fatigue, they would be ones hit the worst by this fabricated plague she would unleash upon the fortress. Some were already weakened to such an extent they were having great difficulty getting up in the morning, to take away what little food they could get and suck what little energy they had left, it was safe to assume some would die in a matter of days.

Dahlia wanted to tell the other slaves her plan, but she knew if one person were to leak her plan or even discuss it in confidence she would be executed.

Would these deaths be justified? How can I prevent this?

She felt an overwhelming guilt plague her conscious at the thought and desperately needed comfort and advice. As a healer she was always determined to help anyone who needed her, but now she had formulated a plan that could mean killing those she was trying to save.

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Fen’Harel listened to her concerns with great empathy. To him this was a necessary evil to prevent the Orb from killing more innocent people, but even trying to explain this to Dahlia had her

looking at him in disgust.

“How can it be so easy to dismiss someone’s life, just like they were an animal?” Each time he tried to take a step closer she would try and maintain her distance in an effort to keep their topic focused.

“I don’t take pleasure in this any more than you.” He tried to keep his voice low and level, but the thought of her backing down on their plan because a few innocents may die in the crossfire was not something he would casually dismiss. “I want to save as many innocents as I can, but the truth of the matter is that when I finally do storm that fortress I don’t know how many I can save. Please, think of what may happen if you or I cannot retrieve the Orb; those innocents have families that will not be safe. Ask any of them and they will pray to every single God and Goddess that what they experience now will not be inflicted upon their families. They would give their life to ensure that never happens.”

His words were passionate and confident and their logic was almost undeniable. She closed her eyes and shook her head in defeat. As tough as she felt as a healer she always made sure that what she did benefited her patients in the end. She would never try and heal or assist her patients in anything she wasn’t willing to undergo herself and realizing this would be the first time she would knowingly kill another person against their wishes was the tipping point.

All the beatings she endured, the demeaning looks and words she had to let slide off her psyche, the pain of being alone and unfamiliar had slowly corroded her resolve over time, but this was the first time she wept. Placing her head in her hands she silently cried to herself.

Fen’Harel watched her for a few moments, soon realizing this wasn’t exasperation or anger but cold sadness. He quietly walked up to her and hugged her softly to his chest. It was enough to realize that everyone has a limit before they feel completely helpless, but to see her cry made him feel like the worst person in the world. No words were spoken between them for what seemed like hours until he heard a soft whimper come from against his chest.

“Okay...I’ll do it.”

He felt a mix of relief and disgust come from the very core of his chest. He felt as though he turned this gentle creature into a monster like him.

“It’s all on me.” He said. “I am to blame for everything that has happened and everything that will happen. All I ask is that you stay alive and I will take any punishment you give.”

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The next few days ran the same as the first and the effects of the poison were becoming increasingly evident but the cause was unknown to everyone except Dahlia. Many soldiers had dropped several pounds and their tempers were quick to set off, even among themselves. Sure enough as Dahlia had expected, they could not understand why they were sickly and weak despite eating every meal and Dahlia had begun to notice the same effects on the leaders as well as the would-be King and his advisor.

Fights broke out in the courtyards and several soldiers, sick with fatigue, began panicking over curses they believed were brought on by Fen’Harel and the Orb. There were even several marauders killed in the middle of the night when they tried to escape the fortress. Soon the atmosphere of the fortress began to feel as though everyone inside were slaves and the King’s most loyal were the only one’s trying to keep the companies inside.

Many of the fortresses operations had slowly ground down to a halt aside from foraging food and

cooking, but the guards were pressured to ensure everything ran like clockwork regardless.

At night Dahlia would volunteer to help the other slaves who were becoming delirious with fatigue and even let her magic be known to the others. 'I can't let them know I'm responsible, but I can at least let them know one secret.' This came as a great relief to many who found her small talents a godsend and all were in agreement that having someone who could help them, however little, was a very beneficial secret to keep.

But even with all her help she had to hold the hand of a dying man, his only comfort in his last moments. Everyone gathered around his body and prayed to Falon'Din to guide his being across the veil. Those who knew him best tried to console Dahlia as she cried into her hands, telling her he had been sick for many weeks and he was due to die any day now. Their words did little to help and after excusing herself from their vigil she laid herself down on her bedroll and cried herself to sleep.

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The King's bedchamber was lit by the soft glow of the fireplace. Emeel paced the floor behind their seats and Mar stood before the hearth feeling the warmth of the stone on the mantle as each remained relatively quiet.

Emeel was the first to break the silence, "The soldiers and their leaders are growing restless. Unless we can find a way to curb this plague we will see an uprising of our own troops!"

"Is it a curse? Is this what Fen'Harel had warned you about?" Mar's voice was low and calm. His demeanor had greatly changed over the past few days since everyone in the fortress had become mysterious ill.

"He was...vague at best. That arrogant sod will lay waste to this entire fortress and we will be too weakened to face him in strength!" Emeel was seething in rage. He picked up the Orb from the table and threw it as hard as he could against the wall. With a loud thud it hit the ground and rolled into the nearest groove in the old stonework floor before finally resting, completely unscathed.

Mar turned around and saw the Orb on the floor and quickly retrieved it before returning to his place before the fire. "Perhaps we should leave this stronghold. If it means losing our fortifications and giving us some distance from Fen'Harel then it may be the best course of action."

"He is waiting for us outside that gate!" Emeel shouted. "If we leave he will destroy us the moment we step foot across the bridge. We need to bolster our forces."

"That does little more than buy us a small amount of time and exhaust our resources. There is only one way out of this and you know what that is." Mar glared at his advisor with anger and determination. "First, you will tap into the power of that Orb. I don't care if it's the last act you commit in this world." Tossing the Orb to Emeel he returned his gaze to the fire once more. "Then we hunt Fen'Harel and bring this battle to him."

## Chapter End Notes

Like I said above I did have to go across the country to attend a job interview and I will be in the process of moving here in the next week or so. What that means is that until I get settled in my new place I will be too busy to update this story as frequently as I once was. If you truly want to keep tabs on me I do have a Tumblr account at



thatwolfybastard.tumblr.com so I may update that every now and then. But I wouldn't expect another chapter for a few weeks. Sorry to those few who regularly follow this story but no worries, this part of the series will have closure and I really look forward to what comes next.

## Chapter 19

### Chapter Summary

Thank you all for the kind words and your patience. Things have died down on my end and I should be able to update more frequently than before. This chapter was very difficult to write, but hopefully it will be enough for now.

One more turn and she tied off the bandages on her hands and clenched her fists to test the strength. Hearing a small tear coming from her palm she sighed and unclenched her hands in defeat. Try as she might she could not fight the blistering skin on her fingers without the proper medicine. Cooking oil and lotus root only managed to soothe the enflamed skin, but if she were to convince the soldiers to continue letting her work in the kitchen she needed to hide her rash. In the meantime she passed off the blistering as an allergic reaction and continued to work with her hands completely bandaged.

At first this posed a problem with her plan, but after some thinking she began using her tainted rags as a convincing means to dry the vegetables before dicing. She was happy to know that she would no longer be in direct contact with the offending ash and could continue her work in relative peace.

However, as the days went on and everyone inside the fortress began succumbing to the effects of the poison, violence was a constant occurrence even among the slaves.

The constant overbearing tension of Fen'Harel's curse was a constant threat on the soldier's minds. Each day the hunters would leave to try and find more food and fewer returned each time. Many who could leave the confines of the fortress found this to be an opportunity to desert their leaders and their Lords. Fen'Harel just watched from the shadows with a smirk on his face.

That night, in the safety of their dreams, they met in the silence of the Fade one last time.

"I will come for you and the Orb tomorrow night." She let out a dry chuckle and shook her head in disbelief at the thought of her torture coming to an end. She remembered the soldiers collapsing from exhaustion in the training yard, the hunters fleeing, the guard numbers dwindling; yes, this was as good a time as any to finally put this business to rest.

He watched her closely as they talked; her weight had dropped over the past few weeks. Her face was pale and thin, her hands and feet were bandaged and bloody, he felt an overwhelming guilt, but also a relief that this nightmare was about to be over. It was becoming harder and harder to lift her spirits each time they met, her exhaustion was so heavy that she could often feel it still lingering in the Fade. She would give him a few half-hearted laughs just to soothe his concern, but in truth she was barely listening as he talked.

As she fell in and out of attention she would only pickup on short phrases here and there and she quietly nodded along to his voice.

"...ove... soon... ere tomorrow... athan... chil..."

That last word brought her to attention, "What did you say? I must have dozed off for a moment."

He laughed to himself before he continued, pulling her closer to his side as they sat on a large boulder overlooking a foggy valley of the Fade. He gently pulled her head close so he could whisper in her ear, "I said I want to take you back to Arlathan with me."

Her face mimicked her slight annoyance as he dodged the intent of her question. She rolled her eyes and asked, "I heard that much, but what was that last part?"

He grinned as he nuzzled his face into the hair lying on her shoulder. "The part where I want you painted naked on the ceiling in my chambers, or the part where we have a dozen children." Her face dropped in disgust as he laughed at her reaction.

"You weird ass; you hardly know me." She shook her head at the obvious attempt to tease her into frustration, but she leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees, watching the fog roll and dance in their windless dream.

"Would you not like children? Or does this have anything to do with me?" His smile was more relaxed as he mimicked her position. He waited patiently for her response as he joined her in watching the Fade move around them.

"I..." her mouth fell open trying to continue her sentence but after a few silent attempts she continued to try and put her thoughts into words.

"I don't know if I can sleep well enough while knowing a child between us could be in danger. Like this." Her voice trailed off into a quiet whisper as she thought more about the issue. He agreed with her, but his eyes betrayed his melancholy while his mouth continued to smile in an attempt to disguise his disappointment.

Wanting to change the subject away from such a sour topic, she drew back and placed her hands behind her in a lounging position before continuing. "I can't imagine you wanting so many children anyway."

"And why is that?" Drawing one leg up to rest his arm over, he turned his attention to her. "Children would get in the way, wouldn't they? They would need to be constantly fed and clothed, sometimes against their will. The constant teaching and discipline, not to mention they would need to be laid down each night to rest, even when they object. And don't forget the late night visits because they heard something, or wanted to sleep in your bed." Giving him a sly glance, he grinned and shuffled next to her.

They sat in silence. Neither he nor her felt awkward with the absence of conversation as they both watched the Fade play around them in what they interpreted as apparent bliss.

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That day Dahlia's heart felt as though it had been replaced with a dozen butterflies. Her hands were shaking from anticipation and stress; the knife in her hand was becoming harder and harder to control with each slice.

In her pocket was her usual handkerchief, but today she would save the rest of her dust for the dinner meal, just to ensure the fort was truly at its weakest. 'It wouldn't matter if they could taste the poison at supper, anyway.'

Each hour that passed felt longer than the one before. When the midday meal was finished it was already time to clean the kitchen and start preparing the final meal for the day. As the young, fair-haired girl stood beside her, peeling and washing the vegetables before handing them to her for dicing, she noticed the girl looking up at Dahlia between each pass. Dahlia noticed the guards at

each exit were looking for something more interesting to fixate upon, rather than watch the kitchen staff perform their duties, so Dahlia thought now would be the most opportune moment to take out her final weapon.

Carefully unfolding the thin fabric revealed the grey dust which settled in the middle of the rag. The young girl looked up at Dahlia in confusion. This had been the first time Dahlia had let anyone see her laced handkerchief and without looking at the young girl, resumed her work, dusting the finished vegetables with the remaining soot.

“Don’t worry.” was all Dahlia whispered before taking the bowl of diced roots around to each cauldron and spreading the ingredients evenly in each soup. While stopping by each vat she gently whispered a simple instruction to each slave.

“Do not taste the soup.”

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Fen’Harel looked for the sun through the tree canopy, trying to gauge the time of day. As far as he could tell it was heading into the late afternoon so he began preparing for his battle. He ate a small meal and gathered his riding gear before leaving his temporary base and descending the cliff’s side. It had taken the better part of the hour trying to locate Dahlia’s horse, but after finding the large grey animal sipping water from the stream he led him back to his tack and began preparing the horse to ride.

As he secured the saddle to the horse’s back he decided that he would charge the main gate fast and as quiet as possible a few hours after sundown. While the horse put up a fight to have the bit placed in his mouth, both instinctively knew that this was only the beginning of a long night of blood and death.

“I bet you’re a better war horse than you are a carriage-pulling nag.” That comment earned Fen’Harel a hard hit from the heavy swing of the horse’s head. A better pre-battle speech had never been concluded so eloquently.

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The steps leading up felt uneven, or perhaps too tall for her legs. Trying to be careful with the tray between her hands she walked slowly up the dimly lit staircase towards the bedchambers. The meal on the tray felt heavy, but she made sure to be as careful as she could to not spill any of the contents from the bowls. The guard behind her would give her a small nudge every so often, as if to say ‘Hurry it up!’ but she tried to make sure her balance was stable. Next to her was the young girl, fairing no better on the stairs than her, but at least the only thing she had to carry was the bread and butter. After the final step had been conquered they would turn the corner and find their way towards the ‘royal wing’ of the fortress; designed to be luxurious and regal, either before their new masters reclaimed the towers or after was uncertain.

Looking out the windows on the east side of the wall had shown Dahlia that the sun was finally beginning to set. Her heart was racing more than usual at the thought of Fen’Harel arriving soon, but she felt hopeless knowing she couldn’t plan for the chaos ahead.

Looking over at her young companion she gave her a small smile before entering the bed chambers of Lord Mar. The room was bright compared to the stairwell and both women bowed respectively to the would-be Lord of this forgotten castle. Lord Mar stood on the opposite end of the room, looking out at the sunset from his window. Although he was thinner than before, Dahlia could still see his body had not weathered the poison as badly as his subjects; she contributed this to the possibility that he ate less rather than trying to eat more as the others were more prone to do.

Dahlia set the meal out before the Lord on a small table before the fireplace. The young girl retrieved the empty wine decanter from the desk and refilled the jug before stepping outside the room to wait with the guard. After everything was set Dahlia gave a begrudging bow before picking up the other meal for her next stop. Mar said nothing and continued to look out the window as though he were gauging an approaching storm. At least this was how Dahlia interpreted the mood.

Once the door was quietly shut behind her, Dahlia walked alone alongside the guard to her final stop at Emeel's chambers. She gave three hard knocks and waited for the command to enter. Inside there were stacks of books and papers piled high around the desk and bed, each had a plate with a half-melted candle pooling inside. Despite having so many candles, the room felt thick and dark. Looking around for a place to set his meal she briefly met the eyes of the room's owner, seemingly glaring at her from the high back chair next to the fire.

Dahlia bowed in feigned respect, averting her eyes from a man who looked to be absolutely livid at her disturbance.

"My Lord. I brought your meal." Keeping her eyes lowered she waited patiently for his instructions. After several seconds of silence she lifted her eyes to meet his once more, finding that he had never taken them away from her. His frame was thinner than when they first met, but she felt it was more from the stress of his position than anything she had inflicted. His hair was in slight dishevel compared to his usual self and he sat in a somewhat lounged position, legs crossed and glaring at her still from beneath his brow.

The sudden panic that held her by the throat was almost enough to make her drop her tray and run, but she held her position and maintained eye contact in a sort of mock challenge. At this point, after all the deprivation and abuse, Dahlia felt as though she held few things sacred anymore. Before her was a mage of renowned power who could kill her without any interference and she would do battle with him even if she had no leg to stand upon.

The sun had set. Her chest felt as though her lungs had little room to maneuver. Emeel looked away from her towards the guard in the doorway and gave him a slight lift of his head, as though he were using his nose to point him to the door. The guard gave him a quick bow and left before closing the door behind him. From the doorway Dahlia could see the young girl turn her gaze towards the floor before presumably leaving with the guard.

Once the room was silent once more Dahlia turned back to the advisor, still in the same position, still with the same look. Placing the meal tray down on a small stack of books on the desk she turned towards Emeel and maintained eye contact once more.

"Is there something more you need, my Lord?" she felt that what ever act she played before, the helpless cook, was not to be tolerated at this point.

After a few moments she heard him utter one word. "Slave."

"It doesn't fit quite right, does it? Not for you, anyway." There was venom in his voice. Dahlia's brow furrowed, 'Is this about Fen'Harel?' she wondered.

"You don't act like a slave should. Even when I first saw you in the courtyard, I said to myself, 'This girl. This little girl would not last. She fights. She does not beg. Her eyes are too sharp.' That is what I said to myself." He rose from his position, laying down heavy steps as he walked an even pace until he was standing right before her. His body seemed as though it absorbed all the light behind him, making him taller and darker than the shadows in this room.

“Even now, when any other slave would be on their knees, begging for my mercy, you stand; as if you thought you were my equal.” He struck her, quick and smooth. She fell backwards into the desk and toppled the books and food to the floor. Holding her face she was stunned and she tried to feel around her jaw to ensure no joints or teeth were broken. He grabbed her by the arm and jerked her to her feet with what felt like a small display of an underlying strength.

“I know you’re a mage!” He growled at her, squeezing her arm so tight she felt as though he would break it with a quick pull. “I felt your power when I carved your face! I know you’ve been healing those wretched bodies!” The pain in her arm was almost unbearable, she tried to pull her arm from his grasp but he simply grabbed her other wrist and forced her back until her thighs hit the edge of the desk and forced her back against the top, pinning her to the spot.

“Are you going to kill me or fuck me?!” Fighting with all her strength she tried to free her legs from between him and the desk. Just for a little freedom.

“Don’t flatter yourself! My nights are better occupied by myself than letting some filthy woman touch me!” He removed his grip from her arm for a moment of relief before placing it heavily over her windpipe.

The pressure on her neck felt unreal. The constriction on her throat made her feel as though her head could easily pop off. Gritting her teeth and feeling the cold tears stream from her eyes she tried to claw at his face, but the bandages on her fingers prevented her nails from finding much purchase in his flesh. With her peripheral vision growing darker and her moist eyes blurring her vision, she began thrashing her legs as her last effort for freedom and breath. Managing to free one leg from the desk she brought her knee up to his chest and brought the heel of her foot down hard against his groin. The pain was sudden and violent as he slammed his head down into her chest as a reflexive curl. As the grip on her throat lessened she pushed him away from her with her legs before bringing her elbow up against his eye socket.

Dahlia stood up as best as she could without sliding around on loose papers and fallen books. Emeel took to his knees in pain and rage, conjuring a ball of energy in his tightly bound fist he struck Dahlia. Electric tendrils seized her body in total paralysis for what felt like minutes until the energy died out after a few seconds and she collapsed into a heap on the floor, twitching and moaning in pain.

Emeel was the first to recover well enough to stand. Dahlia felt as though her hearing had been plugged and her vision was slow and doubled. She saw Emeel standing over her but his face was turned towards the outer wall. Or perhaps the window. Emeel stood still holding his breath, listening to the noise outside.

Staggering over to the window he opened the pane to listen more closely to the shouts below. The voices were chaotic and no words could clearly be heard, but the shouting and running towards the front courtyard was not nearly as alarming as the blow of the horn heard echoing off the walls and the fire raining from the sky.

## Chapter 20

Hot. Numb.

The electricity which stunned her moments ago was likely an experience she would never forget. The sudden calm was obviously a welcome feeling from the violence which had struck her earlier, even if it would only be for a few moments. Lying on her side, curled up as tight as she could, she waited for the next blow to come.

He stood briefly in the light of the window; the pulsing pain from her blow to the eye was irritating at best, however his attention was drawn in several directions. Looking around the room for a moment, wide-eyed and panicked; he rushed to the chest in the corner. Placing his hand on the cover of the wooden coffer released the ward which held it closed and threw open the lid revealing the Orb within.

The confusion and frustration was evident in his face. He paced the floor excitedly, watching the Orb in his hands as though it would suddenly offer guidance. Loud crashes and flashes of raw heat through the window were quick and relentless; his eyes quickly fell to the floor where she lay.

Her body shook violently as she tried to push herself off the floor; managing only to pull up her torso before a desperate hand grabbed her by the arm and jerked her whole body up to her knees. Kicking and pushing with her feet in order to prevent being wholly drug across the stone floor, they stopped as he flung her against the wall just underneath the window.

The rising smoke and fire crept its way up the side of the fortress, entering through the windows causing them both to cough at the suffocating heat. Emeel closed the window once more; balancing the Orb in his left hand he dug through the inner pockets of his robe for the knife he always kept close by.

Seeing the quick shine on the blade put Dahlia in a panic. Her body signaled her need to retreat, to run as quickly as she could, to run to Fen'Harel's side for protection. She would never make it that far. The fear had fueled her drive for survival as she conjured the fire to her fingertips, letting loose a flash of fire aimed to drop the Orb from Emeel's grip.

Fire, hot and fluid had made full contact with his hand; the shock from her attack had him reeling backwards, gripping the hot, blackened flesh of his hand in pain. The Orb hit the stone floor before rolling underneath the bed and Dahlia was up in a flash to chase after it before her attacker had a moment to think. Scrambling underneath the bed, pushing with her legs, she could feel only the smooth, obsidian surface of the Orb with the tips of her fingers before an angry hand grabbed her by the ankle, attempting to pull her away from her goal.

Thrashing and kicking her legs managed to loosen his grip as the weak bandages on her legs ripped underneath the savage clutch, making it harder for him to maintain his hold. Diving back underneath the bed she wrapped her hands around the Orb before a sharp pain shot up her leg causing her to scream.

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The ride was quick and smooth. Naug'seus' hooves hit the stone bridge in a powerful gallop, plowing through a wall of guards as though they were nothing more than water. Fen'Harel raised his oak staff and the sky grew angry above the fortress. The energy to conjure the raining fire was fueled from his anger alone as the black clouds cried their ember tears. The absolute panic across the hold was palpable as the chaos of retreating guards and slaves attempting to flee across the

bridge only made matters confusing.

The bellowing horns and the slowly ascending draw bridge forced Fen'Harel to spur his steed faster. The bridge only managed to lift a few feet up before Naug'seus jumped over and down the incline before coming to an immediate halt inside the courtyard.

The panic and fear made it difficult for him to see precisely who his enemy was among the panicked slaves. As the fire continued to rain down and set fire to the tents, he dropped down from his horse and waited for the first attack.

Clumsy soldiers and loyalist began making their way towards him, swords raised with feeble arms; a few quick blasts from his hands were enough to topple their strength.

"I will spare the innocent and nothing less!" he roared as he continued to quickly dispose of each guard who made their presence known. Sweat from the exertion and the heat of the fires began flowing into his eyes, still he fought his way towards the steps to the castle. It wasn't very long before many of the soldiers had taken the opportunity between the chaos of their brother's deaths before judging the fight to be lost and retreating over the bridge.

As the court yard calmed, he stopped at the foot of the stone stairs. Glaring down at him was the self-proclaimed Lord of the keep and flanking him were four distinguished knights. The fire had stopped raining from the sky and a soot-filled rain began drizzling down in its wake. Fen'Harel looked up at them, studying their force before realizing neither the mage nor the Orb was among them.

Black rain painted their battle field and faces. Each of the leaders stepped forward, surrounding their Lord in a display of power and loyalty before brandishing their weapons. Fen'Harel watched this orchestrated display play out before him, watching as each member took their place. The archer remained poised next to Lord Mar who held a shield and sword so honed and vibrant even the tainted rain couldn't mask its reflective surface. However, the other three bandit leaders stood firm halfway down the steps, waiting for the first move from their opponent.

Fen'Harel stood quietly. The adrenaline pumping through his veins made his palms shake as he tried to anticipate the movements of his new prey. The feet of the outer two leaders were not pointed forward towards Fen'Harel like the one in the middle, which could mean they meant to flank him. Even if he went after either of the outer two, the middle was geared and ready to take the blow while the other two could pivot around and resume their strategy. The middle was meant to be the anvil while the outer two were meant to be the hammer. Fen'Harel spied the archer nock an arrow, he was clearly meant to distract rather than be the last defense to their Lord; a clever strategy to keep the flow of battle going, but he would not underestimate the deadly accuracy of a well placed shot.

What was the first move?

If he didn't make a move soon the archer would force him into action regardless; but then there was Mar. He was the hidden dagger in all this. Fen'Harel couldn't fathom where his moves could land and there was no doubt, he would not stand there and be the last line of defense at the castle door.

The middle man drew up his shield and mace, anticipating the first blow, while the other two loosened their stances and drew their shoulders back; they were prepared to move quickly.

Fen'Harel moved his leg back, widening his stance for more flexible maneuvering, keeping his shoulders down and his staff pointed forward towards his targets. The rain drenched his hair and



rolled off his face as each warrior fought the urge to wipe the gritty rain from their brows, but no one would dare break eye contact.

“Fen’Harel!” Mar roared. “You have kept us waiting for quite a while now! We have been preparing for your arrival for many months! And once we kill you we will rebuild here once more, with the help of my Orb!”

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Her screams felt as though they had deafened her hearing as they bounced off the bare walls. Clutching the Orb tightly to her chest she used her body as a shield to prevent Emeel from obtaining it once more. Through the tears in her eyes she looked down at her leg and saw little but the bright red pool accumulating around her leg.

Emeel withdrew the blade from her calf and the blood began flowing more heavily than before. Panic had set in as he grabbed her arm and jerked her up. Looking into his face she saw his rage even through her watery eyes as he lifted the blade in his burnt and blackened fist, aiming to bring it through her chest.

Magic. Any magic. Pulling the orb closer to her core, she just wanted him away; wanted him to stop hurting her.

She felt heat emanating from her center followed by a leeching pull from what felt like her entire body. Emeel watched as the Orb came to life in her palms, raking bright green wisps over her body. Watching the Orb in her hands had filled him with dread, remembering how the Orb had nearly sucked all the magic and strength from his body before; he was terrified to get too close to it, fearing it may begin pulling all the magic from her as well as him.

His grip began to loosen but his hand still held her arm. Her clutch began to relax as the Orb soaked up the magic from her body like a sponge. Green tendrils licked at her skin leaving behind little more than the feeling of a warm breath on her flesh. As her limbs grew colder, she felt as though she would pass out in exhaustion. Emeel was becoming fearful as he felt the pull of his own magic pass through her where they had contact.

The Orb engorged itself on the raw magic between them before letting loose a powerful burst of energy which flung them both to the furthest corners of the room. Dahlia skid across the floor from her prone position, feeling nothing except the annoying pain radiated from her wounded calf and the scratches from her bare flesh raking across the floor. Emeel hit the wall with such a force the decaying stone nearly broke away into the adjacent room. The room spun in his head; periods of black and broken consciousness made it difficult to recognize the room around him and the danger he was now in.

Dahlia quickly spied the same knife which had stabbed her earlier, blown back by the Orb and lying cold in the corner underneath the windowpane. She was so close to freedom. Ignoring her leg she crawled on her hands and knees and grabbed the knife by its sweat-slick handle.

Emeel’s head felt as though it were in a vice. The trauma from the blast had smashed the back of his head against the stone, blood pour down into his eyes from the wound as his head fell limp to his chest. His magic was drained, his body was frail; he managed to pick his head up enough to witness a pair of amber eyes staring down at him. She was death personified. Her hair had come loose from their binds, letting it frame her body as though it were a ghostly shadow, and in her hands was the knife he had planned for her demise.

“Should I wait for you to pass out before I kill you? Should I extend to you that mercy?” her voice was dry and cracking.

"I-I have suffered the curse for weeks...I can't... I can't overcome t-that demon." He swallowed hard, licking his lips before continuing. "M-My Lord... Mar... He can kill him! He...must..." before he could continue Dahlia pushed all her weight into the hilt of the blade, sinking it into his chest as far as it could go.

"There was no curse you idiot!" With the last of his strength he tried to push her off his body, but as the blood began seeping freely from his mouth with each exasperated cough, his grip on her shoulders weakened. The blade caught him between the ribs, puncturing his lung, but even still Dahlia wiggled and sliced the wound wider to ensure the stab was lethal.

With the last of her strength gone she fell back on her rump, pulling the blade from his chest and cradling it in her lap; satisfied enough to simply watch him bleed out before her. She felt cold, both physically and emotionally. Looking up to see him clutching his hand to his wound, she could see the anger and confusion in his eyes, but with no ability to voice his query.

"If there is such a curse, then it is me. I poisoned you. I poisoned everyone; even myself! With two plants and a few vegetables, no less." She looked down to her calf where the wound was still bleeding, but clearly not life threatening. "You knew I was a mage. Why let me live? Why put me into slavery if I could be a threat?" She brought her eyes back up to find his head bent to his shoulder and his eyes dull and lifeless like a fish. No breathing. No bleeding.

"Fucker."

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Everyone felt the sudden blast of raw power coming from high in the tower. Fen'Harel was momentarily distracted from the shock. Feeling his power calling back to him was practically euphoric, if just for a quick moment. But the pulse from the Orb had told him a great deal of information: the Orb was still here, the mage is not hiding in the battle, and the dumb bastard tried to use it again and failed.

In the momentary distraction the archer let loose his arrow, hitting Fen'Harel in the arm. Reeling back from the force of the blow, his attention snapped to the warriors running towards him, attempting to herd him to his slaughter. Breaking off the shaft and leaving the arrow tip in the muscle, Fen'Harel summoned the magic and rage from his body to release a void between the warriors and Mar. The suction seemed to come from the Fade itself, pulling everyone to its center. The three warriors were practically pulled from their feet from behind, sliding across the mud soaked courtyard as though they were dragged by their necks. The archer tried to set another arrow, but the vacuum of the rift pulled the arrow from his fingers and into the nothing. Fen'Harel held the rift open for as long as he could while trying desperately to pull his prey away from him and into one small area.

Mar crouched down low, turning his shield to the side to allow the force to pass through him as much as possible. With one leg fully extended to act as an anchor, he was determined to outlast Fen'Harel's power to keep the rift open.

Fen'Harel pulled back, closing the rift and with great focus let loose a powerful force which knocked the warriors back into the stone steps, hitting the mason with enough power to crush their bones through their armor. The men were gasping for air as the armor chest plates had been crushed tightly together; the archer however, lay limp with a grizzly twist in his neck.

Mar stood up, winded but unwounded from the fight. Both he and Fen'Harel were fighting to control their breathing, looking for weakness in the other but remaining still. The arrowhead lodged within his arm was causing Fen'Harel much discomfort, preventing him from using the full range of his shoulder. A few moments passed as each composed themselves to prepare for an even

match; Mar brought his shield up in defense, keeping his sword low and at the ready while Fen'Harel let his energy replenish.

"I do not fear you." Mar brought his shield up to his eyes, waiting for the first strike.

"That's not what I heard." The smile on Fen'Harel's face nearly split his dry lips. Focusing his energy to course down his staff, he threw a flaming mass towards Mar's center but the shield reflected the blow.

Fen'Harel made several more attempts to melt the shield, but the glossy surface was too reflective to absorb much of the heat. Mar just stood at the top of the stairs, biding his time and waited for Fen'Harel to expend his energy before taking the fight directly to him. Direct blasts were not penetrating the shield and Fen'Harel knew that this tactic was gaining him no ground. The rain continued to pour, washing away the ash and fire from his wrath, and while his anger was still plentiful he needed to think strategically in this fight.

'I really wish I had my Orb! I could just bring the castle down and be done with him.' An idea quickly took form in his brain. The castle stood on bad ground, and the fortress itself was in poor condition. Fen'Harel adjusted his stance from the battle position to an upright posture that told Mar he considered him less than a threat. Mar did not mimic Fen'Harel's new attitude and remain poised and ready to defend against him.

The magic from his hands snaked up his staff and concentrated into a very dense ball of energy, and with a quick flick of his wrist the ball flew from the staff and hit the castle wall directly above Mar. The stones began to buckle at the force of the blow and quickly fell apart and collapsed. Mar watched as time felt as though it were moving slower than before, bringing his shield up over his head to try and deflect the large stones from crushing his skull. Fen'Harel watched as the dirt settle to see the mass of stones lay unceremoniously in a pile before the door to the castle.

Smiling, Fen'Harel moved up the steps slowly while looking at the small bit of the arrow shaft sticking out of his arm before the sound of rolling stone caught his attention.

The shield which Mar had used through all his battles had protected its master one last time. Dented and holding no further use, Mar pushed the stones away and let the shield fall to the floor as he tried to pry himself from his tomb. Bloodied with numerous broken bones, Mar quickly saw Fen'Harel moving towards him up the stairs.

"I concede you're more resilient than most pests."

Mar pulled his wrecked body from the stone grave, fear now evident as he ran inside as best as he could, believing the Dread Wolf to be close on his heels. With broken hands and a protruding bone from his calf, Mar limped to the stairwell leading to his quarters, hoping Emeel had unlocked the Orb and would defend his Lord.

"Emeel!" He called as he collapsed at the foot of the stairs, but no answer came. Mar called to him again as loud as he could, but his voice only echoed off the walls. Fen'Harel walked casually towards him, feeling a slight twinge of pity for this broken and fearful man, but the thought was quickly extinguished when he thought about all the slaves whom he personally assaulted, disfigured, branded, molested, or killed. His stride began to quicken as his thoughts turned to those unfortunate souls.

'For her.'

Mar felt truly alone. He was battered and humbled before the very God he had angered and not a

soul would come to his rescue. His breath hitched in his throat as he tried to pull his body back onto his feet. Using the wall as support he pulled a small dagger from the scabbard in his boot and used what little ability he could muster from his broken hand to point it at Fen'Harel. The blood was stinging his eyes, but he was determined to at least die facing his enemy.

“You! Y-You are no better than I! I could wield the Orb better than you! You... who would squander such raw power!” Blood began staining his teeth as he sputtered those venomous words.

“I am the Warrior King! I am-” a sickening crunch and Mar went silent. Mar fell limp to the floor without warning and the back of his head appeared crushed and splayed open for the world to see. The sound of blood gurgling from his mouth as he lay face down in a hot, sticky pool, Fen'Harel looked up to see a queer sight before him.

There stood Dahlia, breathing heavy, hair mussed, red bandaging on her legs and a round object sitting heavy on the floor in a red stained cloth.

A few moments passed as the two stared at each other, Dahlia still clutching her makeshift weapon, before Fen'Harel broke the silence.

“Did you just use my Orb as a flail?”

Dahlia cocked her eyebrow slightly, tilting her head, giving him the most quizzical look before replying, “How else was I going to kill him?”

## Chapter 21

### Chapter Notes

Happy Wolf Hunt Day! Good thing too, I now have a lot more lore to work with thanks to the new DLC. I won't go into anything too crazy or spoilery in the coming chapters, but a lot of what I wanted to do is now backed up by cannon. YAY. I won't say what for those who don't have it yet, no worries.

Thank you all for the comments and the patience, now that I have things tied down here at home I can hopefully get these chapters done more quickly.

“Heed me, dammit! Stop squirming!”

“You are pulling, what is essentially, a jagged little knife from my flesh! Pardon my reaction.”

Trying to wriggle the arrow from his shoulder made his muscles twitch, but he sat as still as he could on the bench as she continued her work. Blood had coated the shaft making it difficult to grasp the small bit of broken wood, but every time she had a decent grip on the thing he managed to jerk it from her fingers when she tried to slowly pull it out.

“I’m going to get a stone and force it through the other side if you don’t sit still!” she said through gritted teeth. While she attended to his wound many slaves returned to the castle to seek sanctuary and protection with Fen’Harel. Some wounded, others still shaken from the chaos, sat around the dinning hall while their wounds were being tended to by their companions. Many were overjoyed at the thought of their slavery coming to a well-fought end, some were even talking about a celebration once tensions were released and their wounded were healed.

Both he and Dahlia quietly agreed, for both their sakes, that appearances between them should be respectful and anonymous in the company of others. However, there were frustrating moments when she would forget this and scold him, and each time he would glance at her from the corner of her eye and give her a cocksure smirk. This made her blood simmer in annoyance and she would give him a wretched scowl in return. Thankfully her back was turned towards the others and only he could see the display; his lips twitched as he held back a smile.

Rolling his orb back and forth on his knee as he patiently waited for her to finish, he spied a young lady with short, curly blonde hair approach them. She had a similar design etched over her eye as Dahlia, but her gaze remained fixed on the floor as she walked bashfully towards them. As she came closer he could see her cheek was swollen and bruised, he stilled himself and straightened his back before addressing her.

“Is there something you need, da’len?” trying to keep his voice even and quiet.

She stood several feet away from them, never once bringing her gaze up to meet his. She began to fidget with her fingers, trying to make her words, but she was on the verge of asking forgiveness and retreating to a corner. Sensing her fear, he asked, “What is your name?”

“Everyone... calls me Sunny.”

“Are you here alone?”

“I-I was... going to Arlathan, to stay with my brother. I wanted to attend the university, then my escort...” She began picking at the dirt underneath her nails nervously. Fen’Harel pieced together the picture and began to change the subject away from such an unpleasant experience.

“The University? In the Arts District by the water?” She nodded.

“Their library is quite extensive. If you attend you may find me there some days.” She smiled to herself and slowly raised her head to meet his gaze before quickly darting her eyes over to Dahlia.

“I was so worried, Lady Lavellan! I heard a lot of...angry noises coming from down the hall. And then the fire rain! Lord Mar threw me aside when he stormed out of his room.”

“Have a seat somewhere and I’ll look at that nasty wound on your head, alright?” Dahlia was starting to get impatient with the arrow. Each time she wiggled it around, the shaft would soon be covered in new blood and Fen’Harel would pull it from her fingers once more.

“Lady Lavellan...” Fen’Harel started with pain and frustration etched on his face. “May I recommend using a healer’s gentle touch?” The comment was meant to be sarcastic; however, Dahlia had lost what little patience she had dealing with this small problem that she reached into her belt and pulled out a blood-streaked knife.

Fen’Harel saw the blade and became a little hesitant. It was obviously not an edge meant for kitchen work, this knife was meant for taking a life. She held the blade up to the arrow and made a few small scores into the shaft. Setting down the frightening thing she used a small handkerchief and knotted it tight into those new grooves. There was a moment of pure dread displayed across his face as he watched her fist the fabric and wrench the arrow from his arm.

Fen’Harel stifled his growl as best he could so as not to alert the others, but he looked up with damp eyes to see that Sunny was almost in shock.

Trying to brush off the act as something benign, Fen’Harel blinked back his tears and gave a small smile, “The good healers... know how to get the job done...”

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Dahlia worked tirelessly on the few injured souls, many had simple burn injuries while others had small sprains; some were simply looking for cures to preexisting ailments. All the able-bodied refugees helped out with simpler tasks such as pumping fresh drinking water, preparing new foods, and applying minor first aid.

Fen’Harel, once his arm had been properly bandaged, had pulled several men and women aside to help with various tasks around the hold. He ordered them to pile the dead into a pit and light it aflame; ‘No proper burial is meant for these wicked beings.’ he told them.

They picked apart the armor and weapons of the dead and tossed their remains on the fire. Mar and Emeel were pulled from the castle and callously pitched into the roaring flame no different than if they were refuse. Afterwards, Fen’Harel had them tend to the horses in the stables and look for bedrolls, tents, clothes, food stores, and medicine.

Walking back inside the dinning hall he found many men and women celebrating despite some superficial injuries. Many were laughing while they shared the food they had and drinking their fill on the wine reserves; Fen’Harel just smiled at their joy.

Looking around once more he notice Dahlia was no where to be seen and began asking a few

people where the healer went. Pointing to the darkened stairwell, several revelers said she went upstairs after the dead mage was pulled from his room, to rest.

Climbing the dim stairwell was unnerving enough without the faint sent of old blood, but once he reached the top he saw a small light flicker from one of the chambers at the end of the hall. As he walked closer he could hear the sounds of papers flapping and old wooden drawers scuffing. Quietly peeking through the doorway he saw her digging through the drawers of a desk piled high with heavy books. The floor had scattered papers everywhere and smell of blood was very potent here.

“Ugh! Did they burn it?” she whispered to herself.

“Burn what?” Her yelp made him grin. Combing her hair down to feign composure she looked around the room once more.

“He had something I need. Especially after everything I had to deal with over these past few months.” She left him standing by the desk as she carefully walked to the fire place, looking between book piles and inside small boxes until she found one with an ornate latch. The box came open easily and she let out a small prayer in gratitude as she pulled out a black satchel with a gold drawstring and pieces to a decorative pipe. Seeing this he shook his head in near disbelief, chuckling at her as she pieced together the beautiful instrument and sat down before the dying fire.

“You leave a party to smoke in a room by yourself?” She was barely listening as she packed the weed and lit the chamber, inhaling the deep and rich smoke. He walked over to her and stood beside her on the plush lounge chair, “You know, I still have to pay you back for ripping that arrow from my arm.” She leaned back, looking up to him towering over her; she let out a long stream of smoke into his face.

“Before that, there is something we need.”

“And that is?” dipping his head closer to her ear, nuzzling her jaw.

“A bath.”

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Fen'Harel angrily scrubbed at his scalp with his fingers, trying to rinse the soot and dirt from his hair. With each rinse the water became more translucent, but still he felt no less clean.

“Making any progress?” he heard her call from the chamber beside him. They had made their way to the master bed chamber and decided to claim this room for the night. Lord Mar had kept a much tidier living space and the room had a private bathing room with a large copper tub.

“Wretched hair. I’m certain I probably have a bird’s nest in here somewhere.” He rinsed his hair again, infuriated at making such little progress.

“I could just shave your head if you like?” Hearing her laughing from the next room made him feel impatient, but after several minutes he felt his hair was about as clean as it was going to be; as far as he could smell, at least.

She sat before the fire in a large velvet chair, gently cradling the Orb in her hands. She continued to smoke her pipe in relative tranquility, deciding to keep it as a trophy of sorts along with her new dagger. Hearing the heavy door open behind her she turned to see Fen'Harel wringing out his hair, shirtless.

Even in the dim light of the fire place she could see the outline of his shirt on his skin, streaked by

the soot and dirt from the rain. “You spent all that time in there and all you did was wash your hair?”

“That’s half the battle.” He said as he began gathering his hair into a tie, high off his shoulders. “Now then,” he grabbed the Orb from her lap and let magic build from his finger tips as he caressed the deep grooves on the sphere. Green, liquid magic poured into the channels, slowly engulfing the Orb. Letting his magic flow freely from his hands like water, he felt as though he were navigating a labyrinth within the object.

Dahlia stood up and ran towards the bathing chamber in full retreat, but his eyes never left the Orb. Once he felt his magic hit a deep lock within he gave one last push and soon his body was flooded with old magic. His inner pools felt bottomless with this potent energy that it filled him with an ecstasy that made his knees shake.

Holding the Orb close against his chest he felt it pulse with his energy. The air around him crackled and popped, even Dahlia could feel the electricity in the air from the adjacent room.

“It’s not going to explode, is it?” Her muffled voice brought his thoughts forward and he walked towards the door with the buzzing Orb in hand. Giving a soft knock and a small laugh he called out, “It won’t do anything now. You can come out.” A few seconds passed before he heard the latch slide open to reveal her disheveled head peek out from the door frame.

Her eyes immediately fixed on the soft green flame of the Orb as he held it out to her to witness. “It...didn’t do that last time.” As if on cue, the orb began to flake and disintegrate in his hand; absorbed by his being to become one and held safe within him. She looked a little panicked, but he gently led her back into the bathing room to finish his bath and help her with her own.

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The copper basin was a luxury in bathing she had never experienced. The tub itself could possibly hold three people, but for two people there was ample room. They sat on opposite sides of the tub, enjoying the heat and the quiet as he massaged her foot close to his chest. The steam and heat from the bath had made the smooth, stone walls sweat inside that small room, making the occasional dripping noise sound like a meditative tune. Opening his eyes he peered through the steam to see her staring up at the ceiling, letting her hair pool over the edge of the bath and onto the floor. It was then that he noticed the dark red marks around her throat and pinched her toe to get her attention.

“Your neck.” Was all he said. She brought her head forward and touched her neck, even the lightest contact from her fingers sent pain through the area. Ever since she had killed Emeel her neck had been bothering her, at times it was difficult to pronounce hard letters but the adrenaline had kept her from noticing much.

He stood up and left the tub, leaving her in the water alone. Drying himself off briefly, he then wrapped the towel around his hips and pulled a small wooden stool to the side of the basin where she rested. Careful to not brush against the sensitive part of her neck, he cradled her head before bringing his lips down softly on hers.

The steam had softened her lips, but there were still a few sensitive areas that ignited with fleeting pain when the heat of his kiss passed over them; she would not complain. He turned his head just enough to angle this kiss in his favor as his tongue requested entry. She would grant him his demand and much more as she moaned with satisfaction, but the pain in her throat forced her to break away.

She uttered a small apology and watched as he nodded with sympathy on his face. A moment



passed in awkwardness, Fen'Harel dipped his fingertips in the bath while he looked over her body's distorted view underneath the ripples. Watching his hand move the water gently back and forth over her body was enjoyable, but not as much as when wisps of magic began flowing from his fingertips through the liquid, climbing over every inch of her body.

It was not so much pleasure as it was soothing feather touches over her chapped and aching skin. They watched as glowing white tendrils kissed her body under the water's surface, healing bruises and cuts as it went. The knife wound on her calf which echoed with pain each step she took was gradually beginning to lessen as he poured his magic into the gash. His magic retreated from her newly mended skin and began crawling up her torso, breathing over her breasts to her head. He withdrew his hand from the water to seize her face gently, turning her head to meet his lips once more. He left her lips and trailed kissed down her jaw as he let his hand slide to her neck, bringing his magic back to his fingers and focused it to their new position.

Opening her eyes, she stared at the wall as he continued to heal her body while placing his lips on every inch of her he could comfortably reach. "You're better at this than I am." Recognizing that her voice had returned to its natural pitch. "I'm sure I could have been less sensual; but there is no fun in that."

"Right you are."

He stood up abruptly and reached into the tub to hoist her out, "My love, you will wither in this water! Come; let me dry you in these luxurious sheets our guest was so kind enough to leave behind!" His voice was jubilant as he carried her to the bed sopping wet.

"Alright, but I have enough water in my hair to soak that entire bed; I'm not afraid to use that as a weapon."

"Best behavior. Got it."

## Chapter 22 NSFW

### Chapter Notes

This chapter is nothing but sex. Messy and glorious sex. That's the only warning that needs to be mentioned. Have fun.

This bed was much larger than hers back home; a true King's bed, if she ever saw one before. The feather down was so soft underneath them it felt as though they would sink to the floor. The room was very dark with the curtains drawn around bed; only a weak glow from the fireplace helped him see her silhouette above.

She sat gently on his hips, straddling him as she ran her palms up and down his chest, feeling for the slight indentations between his muscles. He let his hands rest on the top of her thighs, kneading her skin with kind squeezes.

He took in a deep breath as he watched her continue to take the tips of her fingers across every ridge of his body, "How do you feel?"

"A little funny," she said. "I...don't think I was smoking pure fire weed. That bastard must have been seeing colors when he was alone." They laughed quietly, never once taking their hands off the other. She slid her hand up to his shoulder and stopped before touching the sensitive area around his exposed wound. "You healed me, why not you?"

"I could, but I would much rather feel you do it." She let out an inconspicuous sigh and leaned forward to better angle herself above his injury. Taking in a deep breath she began concentrating hard before her target. As soon as she began to channel her magic towards the wound a burst of healing force exploded in front of her face. For a few seconds they marveled at the sight of crackling green magic lighting up their small quarters before spreading out and like dying fireflies.

"What happened? That's never happened before." He grabbed her hands, pressing his thumbs into her palms. "That was raw power, you were concentrating too hard, I think. I'm glad you were just trying to heal me. If you tried to light the fireplace like that you could have easily caused an explosion." He smiled, but she retracted her hands in horror. "Do you think it will go away?"

"I don't know." He grabbed her hands once more, "I think...the Orb's discharge may have opened the gates, in a manner of speaking." She weighed the possibilities of this new magical prowess in her mind; Fen'Harel let go of her hands and began rubbing her thighs as before, leaving her to her thoughts for the moment. After a few moments she came out of her mind and leaned forward as before, gently hovering over his wound. Cupping her hands around his shoulder as though she were trying to keep the wind from a tiny fire, she began concentrating a little of her magic into his cut.

He let his hands fall to his side as he watched their silhouettes become tenderly illuminated from the small light between her hands. Unable to help the grin at seeing her positioned over him, like trying to tell his shoulder a secret; her face was just inches from her work as she pressed her body flat into his. Once she was finished she was surprised at how quickly she was able to heal such a deep wound, and with energy to spare. Sitting up once more, she ran a hand over his shoulder, feeling for where the wound would normally be. "I don't believe it."

He caught her hand on his shoulder and gave it a small squeeze, "Feels much better now." Letting her hand go and hooking his arm around her back, he sat up to bring his face closer to hers and placed his lips on the hinge of her jaw. He caressed her throat, bringing his mouth down the length of her neck until he could kiss her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tightly in place.

The heavy air of arousal spread through them quickly, she could feel his erection pressing along her backside as he tried to keep himself propped up with one arm. Her mouth fell open, whimpering for his touch as she placed both hands on his shoulders and pushed him back into the mattress.

It was difficult to see him in so little light, but she could see the heat from his stare clearly. The honey glow of his skin seemed slightly darker than before, perhaps from being outside, but she sat above his pelvis and continued to enjoy her muted view. Hardened muscles could be traced underneath her fingertips as she pushed her hand up his torso to his neck.

He lay comfortably on his back, taking in the pleasure of her touch on his skin. Running his hands up to her hips, he ground her backside against his aching manhood, releasing a groan from his deep within his chest.

"Do what you will. I am at your mercy, vhenan." He released her hips and let them rest on her thighs once more. Flustered and hot, she leaned over him and smothered his mouth with hers. With her fingers threaded through the wet tangles in his hair, he retreated from her lips to leave a trail of kisses down between her breasts.

She felt light, as though her body was vibrating from his touch. "Your scent... I can smell how wet you are from here." He gave a small chuckle as she let out a quiet moan. "Well I can feel how hard you are from up here." Dipping her bottom down, she caught the very tip of his cock at her slick entrance before letting it slide down her slit and tap her ring.

Throwing back his head into pillow below he tried to stifle his moan before her soft lips were on his once more. Reaching between their sweat-slick bodies she gently grasped his cock, letting him jerk in her hand before guiding him between her folds. Placing her hands on his chest she pushed away and slowly relaxed back onto him, relishing the feeling of sexual relief and complete fullness.

Thinking back on their first affair had her comparing the feeling to now. Spreading her legs a little wider to offer him a better view, she let her hands rest on his chest while he placed his on her hips. "It's taking my every ounce of restraint to not slam you down into this bed and fuck you until you burst." She let out a small, taunting moan to try and coax out his threat but he remained as still as he could; aside from the rigid grip he maintained on her body.

"Just... give me a little while longer." Her voice was quiet and small, "I just want this. Then you can play with me how you like." Before he could utter a single word she rocked her hips forward, grinding into him like a rolling wave. Holding his head against the pillow as she continued to ride him, he closed his eyes and let his other senses paint her picture in his head. The smell of her wet hair and hot sex made his body harden while trying to slay the urge to buck into her mercilessly. The feeling of her hands, her nails, gradually digging into the muscles across his stomach; he could practically see the ring in his mind, resting above her stretched quim, as it gently bobbed as she took in his every inch.

But thoughts quickly disintegrated with each little sound she made.

Deep breaths, tiny gasps, elevated moans. He could feel the quivering muscles surrounding his cock begin to clench with each swing of her hips as her tempo began to increase.

“Won’t you watch me?”

Pushing his thoughts away, he opened his eyes and realized exactly how breathless he was. “It’s difficult to keep calm when I’m pushing against the very back of your wall.” He wasn’t sure if it was water or sweat dripping down his neck, but that notion quickly passed as well when she leaned forward over him, letting him slide gently out of her before bringing her hips down slowly.

Without saying a word she continued to slowly stroke him, torturing him as she licked the sweat from his neck. “Spirits of Lust could take a lesson in this.” He whispered to himself.

Pressing her head against his chest she could feel his heart beat swiftly against her cheek. Placing his hand over her breast, he rolled the hardened nub between his fingers as her pace began increasing once more. Gasping and moaning, she felt the sensitivity in her clit growing as she began loosing the rhythm to her grind. Her frustration was becoming evident as she tried to keep her building peak from falling; he grabbed her hips and began slamming her down on top of him, bucking for added force.

“Ah! H-Hard, it’s...” She wasn’t sure what she wanted to say, or even if that was her intent. Her throat was dry from her panting, but she wanted to scream with pleasure.

She pushed off his chest and let him guide her down on his lap as her whimpering became louder. Feeling him brush against that wonderful spot inside had her pleading to him; wanting the utter domination of her body. She leaned back to grab her ankle as she pinched the peak of her breast with her other hand, pushing her hips forward had him hitting her hard; it took only a few more knocks before she was quaking with release.

“I-I’m! I can’t...” Hearing her misplace her words and feeling her walls grip and flutter around his cock was a feeling he savored. Bringing her body down on him, powering through her orgasm as her whole body began to wrench, he felt on the brink.

“Vhenan, I’m coming!” he groaned, pumping hard into her before trying to pull out. She watched as his face contorted into a grimace, drawing his head forward as he attempted to pull her off him and finish himself. She leaned forward and pushed her hips against him, keeping him buried firmly inside her as deep as he could go.

He felt as though he had lost his mind. The grip he had on her waist tightened to an almost uncomfortable degree as he could feel the throbbing pump of his seed leave his body into hers. He felt a twinge of guilt, if just for a brief moment, as he held her there until he could feel the pulsing subside. There was an overwhelming sense of affection she experienced as she felt his orgasm pump inside her. His head flopped back into the pillows, letting his eyes close and releasing the hold he had on her body.

His hair was wild; what tie he had used to keep it up had broken a while ago. Watching in satisfaction as the dim light illuminated the beads of sweat across his chest, she smiled in what she could only say was beautiful adoration.

“I love you.”

He felt the nerves of his body gradually dull as he came off his high; his head however, felt as though it were filled with cotton. He opened his eyes, tired and drained, and saw her softly smiling above him.

He gave her a small and weary grin, “I think the party below may have heard us.” She gave him a quiet laugh, “And yet, you didn’t hear what I said?”

“I think you deafened me, but I’m certain I can hear now.”

Feeling awkward at having to confess again, she took a moment to drag the conversation out. Putting her hands on his chest, she lifted her bottom up and let his softening member slide out of her. Fen’Harel let out a heavy sigh, watching the small space between their bodies with fading arousal. His seed now hers began seeping from her channel, trickle underneath her in a warm, slick mess. She brought her fingers down below to try and catch the fluid before it spilled on top of him, but he watched her try in futility.

“You wanted me to... inside you? Or was I wrong?”

“I did. I wanted to feel you that close, because I....love you.”

His senses perked up, if just for a fleeting moment, before he reached up to grab her and pull her down upon him to rest. “Is it bad that I want to love you again and again right now, but can’t.”

“And why not?” she whispered, settling above him as she let him hold her close.

“A number of reasons, but one being that I want to have enough energy to pleasure you, all the way home.

## Chapter 23 NSFW

### Chapter Notes

Hey there, everybody! These chapters are coming out more and more lately and I just want to thank you all for sticking with it for so long. Like seriously, almost 8 months I have been working on this.

I also wanted to point you in the direction of this lovely art piece inspired by the last chapter, created by the cutest smut artist ever, [DeedyLovesCake!](#)

Thanks again for the sweet comments, I take solace in the fact that you are all as filthy as I am. :) Have fun!

He couldn't sleep. Or more accurately, he wouldn't sleep.

Replaying the events of the last few months in his head had him scarcely believing his hardships were over, at least for now. With the Orb back in his possession and his new love safe, he was over come with relief at the prospects of returning to Arlathan; hopefully, not alone.

She snored softly underneath the thick blanket, back exposed to the warm air of the room. He had gotten up a little earlier to keep the fire breathing, but he was looking for something edible for them to eat.

The castle seemed quiet and still, as though they were the only two throughout the entire hold. Once dressed he gently opened the door of their chambers and began walking towards the stairs when a small covered basket caught his eye. The frayed wicker basket was placed on the floor of the hall not too far from his door. Picking up the basket and pulling the white cloth back revealed fruits, a bottle of wine, and a few fresh dinner rolls. With a skeptic eye, he pulled the various items from the bin and gave them a sniff for anything unusual or poisonous. Taking the basket back to the room he discovered Dahlia sitting upright on the bed, blanket draped loosely in her lap and her hair fluffed and unruly.

"You went looking for food?"

"I imagine neither of us have had a decent meal for a long time. While this may not be extravagant, it is safe."

Her eyelids were heavy and burned with fatigue, but she pulled the blanket over her shoulders and made room on the edge of the bed for him to sit. Placing the basket between them he pulled the bottle from underneath the cloth and wiggled the cork free. He took a moment to breathe in the wine before taking a small sip, letting the bitter red coat his tongue and stimulate his senses. The drink held a decent flavor, but in truth he had no head for distinguishing wines. Offering her the bottle he found her gently leaning from sleep, all the while trying to finish eating the banana she peeled.

Placing the bottle on the night stand, he slowly retrieved the half eaten fruit from her fingers and gently lowered her into the bed.

“Hey. I wanted that...” and soon as she hit the pillow she was quietly slumbering once more.

Disregarding the food for now, he disrobed and followed suit since he knew when the sun rose there would be more work for them.

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She would not wake up; she refused to leave the blanket, despite his efforts. Even with a gentle shake, she would groan and hug her pillow tightly to her chest but her eyes would not open.

His sleep was broken throughout the night, but he pulled himself up and watched the sun begin to rise through the window as she slept a little longer. It was now time to rise and prepare for the day's journey and she was adamant about staying underneath her sheets.

After he was dressed he sat down next to her on the edge of the bed and tried to rouse her once more. “Rise. There are people waiting for us I'm certain.”

Her face twisted to show her displeasure as she rolled onto her back, “They celebrated late last night.” She grumbled, “You are probably the only one awake right now.” Bringing the soft, inner part of her arm over her eyes to block out the light, she began falling swiftly back into her slumber. He felt too exhausted to be impatient, but there were many things to do if they were to all leave before the sun set. His plan for the safe return home for everyone relied on an early start, but she remained attached to the bed.

He thought about leaving her and beginning preparations alone, but there was something he wanted to do that required her presence. Hovering over her exposed body, he gently began kissing the soft skin underneath her collarbone while his hands massaged the sides of her torso. She stirred a little, but mostly from aggravation at being awoken again. As his lips moved up towards her jaw she began to relent, but still demanded her sleep.

“I guarantee, no one else is awake. It's barely sun up!” Despite her weak protests, he continued to bring his lips against her cheek until finally they found proper purchase against her own. She groaned in defeat, letting him set the tempo for their tongues until she broke away.

“Just another hour, please.”

He brought his mouth against the small mound on her throat and quietly growled his disapproval. Bringing his head up, he could see she was on the verge of falling asleep once more. Drawing back he placed his hands on her hips and pulled her down the mattress, bringing her head away from the pillows, but still she would give him no reaction.

He adjusted himself on the bed so he could loom over her and repositioned her legs for his comfort. Placing his hands underneath her knees he spread her legs apart and dipped his head to her mound, placing tender kisses above her sensitive opening. The sudden feel of heated breath on her ring had woken her, but still she danced between sleep and aware.

“I think you may be going about this the wrong way. You want me to be even more tired?” pulling her arm from her eyes, she stared with sleepy eyes up towards the ceiling, exposed and tender to his contact.

“I want you awake.” Placing his lips over her ring he could feel the muscles in her legs tighten. Her smell was a mix of her and he from that night and it was beginning to arouse him more easily than he anticipated. Nevertheless, he pressed the tip of his tongue underneath her pierced flesh and relished the taste.

“No fair!” She whined, “What do I have to do to get a little more sleep?”

Licking his lips he looked up and smiled, watching as she brought the back of her wrist to her mouth, forcing her head against the mattress. “There’s nothing you can do now. I have your taste, so you can just lay here and accept your fate.” Moving his hands to cradle the small of her back, he shrugged her legs over his shoulders and pulled her up to a better angle.

Pressing his lips to her sensitive crux, he gave her a small kiss before raking his tongue across her charm. Feeling conflicted, she tried to inch her way away from him, half-heartedly, but he pulled her back to his lips and continued his affliction.

“I’m awake!” she laughed, “I’ll get up, I swear!” Still making an effort to pull away from his grasp.

Taking a moment away from her heat he looked up and chuckled, “I know you will. I’m just trying to be difficult.”

“I give up!” Flinging her arms above her head she closed her eyes and grinned to the ceiling as he continued to tease.

“It’s no fun if you don’t play back.” He let out a lighthearted sigh as he brought his thumb to her clit, pressing gentle rotations against the sensitive nerve. Giving a small, wet kiss to her inner thigh, he thrust two fingers inside her, watching her chest bow off the bed in quiet rapture.

There was a nervous knock at the chamber door. Dahlia almost jumped from the bed had he not held her back. She sat up, watching the door as he pulled his legs up onto the bed, drawing the canopy closed once more before calling out for their guest to enter.

While trying to control her breathing at almost being caught, not only naked, but in the midst of pleasure at the hands and mouth of Fen’Harel, she couldn’t react fast enough when he forced his lips to hers, weighing her back into the mattress even as the door creaked open.

“My Lord? I’m sorry for waking you so early.” held the voice of a young man.

Pulling away from her lips he straddled her leg, pressing his thigh against her sex as he answered the young man.

“It’s no problem. Is there something wrong?” he smiled down at her before biting her neck while kneading her breast, staying as quiet as possible. She, on the other hand, was having more difficulty in remaining silent until he set his lips on hers for a brief moment before replacing them with his hand.

“Nothing truly, we just wanted some explanation on what we are to do now.”

Pumping his leg gently against the center between her legs, she closed her eyes and let him work her over as he continued his blind conversation.

“Please gather everyone you can find to the dinning hall. From there I will give instructions.” He watched her with adoration as her chest rose from the bed, caught in silent release as her legs clamped shut around his thigh, quietly begging him to stop.

“Yes my Lord. I will take my leave.” After a moment of silence, they heard the door open and shut, leaving them alone once more. Taking his hand away from her mouth had left her breathing heavy, but she still kept her eyes closed as he peppered tiny kisses across her chest.



“You have to be awake now. If not...” he slid his hand down her stomach until she bolt upright, nearly butting her head against his.

“No more of that!” she chortled, shielding her belly as she inched away from his hold. “Good Gods! All I wanted was a few more minutes of sleep! Now I have to go wash up again.”

\*\*\*\*\*

It was no small feat to make it downstairs undetected, but as far as she knew no one saw her exit the stairwell from Fen’Harel’s provisional chambers.

Looking over the entire dinning hall she saw around twenty elves, each curious and patient in waiting for Fen’Harel to show. She was so caught up in watching all the people that she failed to spot the fair-haired Sunny saddling up next to her.

“Lady Lavellan. I didn’t know where you had gone.” The sudden voice calling her name had startled her, but she tried to compose herself and answer calmly.

“I...was helping Fen’Harel with his shoulder wound.” She hoped this would be enough to sate the young girl’s curiosity, but she continued.

“After we all ate... I brought up a basket of food for him... last night.”

Dahlia’s throat went dry. She felt her eyes grow wide in trepidation, but said nothing as the girl continued.

“I was going to knock, but...”

‘How can this naive young girl inspire more dread into my soul than that fucking mage?’ Dahlia screamed inside her skull.

Sunny refused to look Dahlia in the eyes, even as her own felt as though they would pop out of her head any moment. She stared down at the girl in alarm; Sunny only blushed more and more as the seconds passed.

“Is this everyone?” A loud voice penetrated the chatter across the hall.

“Yes my Lord. We are all who remain.” came the voice of the young man from before.

Fen’Harel stood before the congregation, tall and stately; exactly how a God would be perceived. Holding out his arms he bid everyone closer as he spoke.

“I am proud to see you all in better health this morning than when I came to you last night. To start, I would see you all returned to your homes safely. I understand many of you were abducted and so we will begin preparing an expedition to Arlathan, where some of you may find an Eluvian with which you may return home.”

Smiles were seen across the room, many prattled quietly among each other in excitement.

“There are a few things we must do first, but foremost, I would not see you all returned to your homes marked as slaves. For those who wish, I can remove the vallaslin from your face, freeing you once more.”

As the chattering grew louder, the same message was practically yelled across the hall. ‘Please!’ they cried, ‘We want to be free again!’

Fen'Harel stepped forward to a young man, marred by the pattern of June. Bringing the magic forth from his hands, he pulled the ink effortlessly from his face to restore his image as flawless as he was once held before.

One by one, every man and woman stepped patiently forward as Fen'Harel erased the shame and disfiguration from their faces. Sunny approached him, bashful as always, scrunching her face as a flickering light show played behind her eyelids. Dahlia waited patiently for everyone, knowing he would never forget her.

Those who had their vallaslin removed earlier began their work, compiling supplies, food, and mending tents for their long journey home. Dahlia looked on as the new faces revealed a happiness she had never seen before. She was the last to step forward, ready to feel like her old self again.

"It won't hurt much will it?"

He smiled, holding his hands before her as he lifted the cursed ink from her face. The magic tingled across the ink lines on her cheek, but the feeling quickly passed until he slowly removed his hands, resisting the urge to caress her face.

"Ar lasa mala revas. You are free."

\*\*\*\*

From the morning well into the afternoon, everyone continued to prepare their caravans for the long journey ahead. Covered wagons were repaired and loaded with food, weapons, shelters, spare clothes, and blankets. Many of the materials needed were gutted from other items across the hold, going so far as to use the battered armor of the slain to mend holes in the wagon's body.

Dahlia and Sunny went down into the cellar where cured meats and other foodstuffs were being held. Sifting through the rotten foods in the freezing room while looking for edibles, Sunny decided to break the silence.

"About what I said earlier..."

'Crap.' Dahlia resisted the urge to groan her frustration. "Yeah?"

"I didn't mean to embarrass you. Earlier. I don't know why I wanted to tell you." Dahlia's heart felt as though it had sunk to the bottom of her stomach.

"I promise! I swear, I didn't tell anyone what I heard! I just left the basket in the hall and left!"

"Oh?" She felt weakened, as though all the energy she had before had instantly evacuated her body.

"Are you mad?"

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she let out a sigh, "No."

"Really?"

"Just embarrassed, that's all."

Grabbing a bundle of cured pork and a small barrel of wine, they both walked back up the stairs and placed the items outside the door before descending again to search for more.

"I just thought... I mean..." Dahlia wished she had been born deaf if it meant this conversation

would never happen.

“It’s okay Sunny, just promise not to tell anyone. Please.”

A silent affirmation was what she received and Dahlia was relieved to set this conversation behind them. As they went through the shelves of jarred fruits and marmalades, Sunny spoke up once more.

“Was he... good?”

‘Damn this girl!’

## Chapter 24

Several hours had passed and they were finally ready to leave the fortress behind them. The druffalo they normally used to supply the milk pulled the heavy wagons across the broken bridge while the able-bodied hunters and Fen'Harel used the horses to scout ahead and guard the convoy.

With the sun at its peak in the sky above, they expected several more hours of daylight before setting down to camp for the night.

Dahlia trailed behind the other three carts, driving the druffalo with Sunny by her side. Keeping a fair distance between her and the cart ahead, she steered the beasts as best she could, trying to keep the bumps and movement to a minimum since she lead the cart full of those most injured.

Fen'Harel trotted Naug'zeus around the party as they traveled down the wagon trail through the thin white trees, kicking up the dry yellow leaves from the road. Sunny watched him closely with quiet esteem as she bashfully questioned Dahlia, quietly so as not to be overheard by the others.

"He likes to wear cottons. I would have thought he would dress in thick silks."

"Uh-huh." The conversation clearly not something Dahlia wished to participate in, let alone let continue.

"I just always imagined Fen'Harel would be more..."

"You're wrong. What ever you have to say, it's probably wrong..."

"Regal."

Holding the reigns tightly in her gloved hands, she couldn't help but slump back in her seat and roll her eyes, letting Sunny continue her one-sided dialogue. Fen'Harel pulled back on his steed, stopping the entire caravan and pointing to a small clearing along the roadside.

"Let's take a moment to rest here for a while before continuing. We should be out of these woods before the sun sets."

\*\*\*\*

As everyone sat around the wagons, talking and sipping water from their skins, Fen'Harel had taken a moment to stretch his legs before making his way to the rear carriage. Pulling back the leather flaps to the wagon, his eyes burned as a cool green light leaked out from inside. Dahlia had her back turned to him as she began working on healing one of the few passengers inside. She tied her hair up in a no-nonsense knot and continued to flood the young woman's wounds, numbing them and easing her pain on what was sure to be the first leg on this long and bumpy trip.

Sunny watched her work from the front of the cart, keeping the leather flaps behind the drivers seat open enough to let the light shine through. She was the first to see Fen'Harel. Her eyes grew with mild excitement, reaching out a hand to get Dahlia's attention, but Fen'Harel brought a finger up to his lips; a polite signal to keep quiet.

As Dahlia continued to work with full concentration, he spied the small ribbon keeping her hair out of her face. With a small wisp of magic he pulled the ribbon loose, letting her hair tumbled down into her face. Slightly annoyed she brushed her hair back once more, twisting it around and securing it to her head using a thin stick of yew.

He smiled to the yellow haired girl, giving her a playful wink before using a small amount of magic to pull the rod loose from her hair, letting it fall into her face once more. Frustration began to rear its head as she twisted her hair around her fingers in agitation before jamming the yew rod into her tresses. Being as quiet as he could he stretched his arm up and grabbed the rod between his fingers and pulled it out. Feeling for the rod in her hair she turned around to see him behind her, grinning as he waved the stick back and forth.

Red faced and aggravated at being teased while trying to help an injured woman, Dahlia heard a small snort come from behind her. Turning back around she saw Sunny holding her hand over her mouth as she held back her laughter; even the woman she was helping was starting to laugh.

“You two knew? Don’t encourage this! And you shouldn’t be laughing!” the woman tried to calm herself, but her grin remained on her face. Sunny turned around, her cheeks hurt from smiling too much.

“I hear laughter is the best medicine.” Grinning he took a step back, watching her in full view as she quietly hopped out of the wagon. Reaching back in for a thin bead roll, she pulled it out and closed the leather flaps to the wagon, hoping for a moment of privacy.

Sunny watched the rear of the wagon closely, waiting for Dahlia to return when she heard, “What are you, twelve!?” before a soft ‘thwap’ was heard.

A few more hits and she saw him trotting out from behind the wagon, hand raised in defense and grinning with amusement. Realizing he wasn’t being chased he walked back to the front of the cart and pulled himself into the front seat next to Sunny.

Fishing underneath the seat, he found the familiar decorative box and opened it to reveal Dahlia’s pipe. As he packed the leaf he glanced over to Sunny, who had inched herself to the very edge of the seat next to him, giving him as much space as she could afford.

“Don’t shy away, I’m not going to hurt you or anything.” But still, she kept her distance.

Returning his attention to the pipe, he held the mouthpiece to his lips and conjured a small flame between his fingers and fueled the dry leaf. A few small breaths as he inhaled the white smoke, letting the smell fill his senses before pushing out a steady stream from his lips. “A little bird told me that I have you to thank for the basket of food left outside my door last night.”

Sunny seemed almost shocked, but nodded timidly before speaking. “It was late, but we wanted to make sure you had something to eat as well.”

Taking another puff from his pipe, he leaned back and stared into the clearing where the others were passing around the water skin while talking.

“It must have been pretty late when you stopped by, though. I don’t recall hearing a knock.”

Sunny couldn’t speak; mortification had her paralyzed as the blush in her face became more prominent, but Fen’Harel closed his eyes and chuckled to himself. “I think I know why; heard some things did you?” Sunny couldn’t speak. In her head she tried to come up with an excuse to why she would leave a basket of food in a hall for any other reason, but as the time gradually passed with no reply the answer was obvious.

With a small laugh he snuffed out the pipe and disassembled it before returning it to its box, making sure to place it back exactly where he found it. “It’s okay. You’re not in trouble, you can tell the whole camp for all I care.” He began descending from the wagon when she called back to

him, still red from embarrassment. "I don't think Dahlia would like that; if everyone found out."

He dropped to the ground, and shot her an innocent, yet mischievous, smile.

"No, she won't. But we will see how she feels after we set up camp tonight."

\*\*\*\*\*

After a few more hours of traveling, they had managed to finally leave the white forest behind. The plains were very long that it was hard to make how wide the area was with so many hills between the empty valleys. Blanketing the roadside were long, golden waves of sweet grass and so they decided this would be a fine area to rest the animals for the night.

With an hour before sundown they managed to clear the long grass and pile it high for the druffalo and horses to eat while they began setting up their campsite. Most of the tents were circling the bonfire they made, close enough for warmth, but far enough to keep the light from being too bright. Once the sun had set and the meals were being distributed, the wine was passed around for everyone to enjoy. Sunny only sipped at hers, finding the fermented berries to be too powerful for her palate to enjoy. Fen'Harel and Dahlia however, seated modestly next to each other, drank a few cups as the conversations grew more avid.

Laughing about old jobs and family issues made everyone homesick, but kept their spirits up, for they would soon get to see their homes and families once more. Sunny looked over to see Dahlia smiling genuinely, poking the conversation along as Fen'Harel watched her and the others talk. To Sunny, Fen'Harel was becoming less of an idol on a pedestal and more like everyone around them; nothing to be afraid of.

"Lady Lavellan! You got some family? Any children?" a white-haired man called out to her, "You haven't said anything about where you are from."

Dahlia took a sip, cheeks red from the warmth of the wine spreading about her face. "I live alone; just a disgruntled healer living on the edge of town." He laughed and a few others joined him, "No kids?" She shook her head, "No kids."

"At least not yet, I think." She craned her head back to see him with his mischievous smile beaming back at her. She pulled her lips back to give him an unamused look, telling him she didn't feel like continuing this line of conversation in public. Sunny brought her mug up to her lips, trying to hide her smile. To her, this scene was playing out like two secretive lovers in a book, and she was the only one who knew.

"Tell me Lady Lavellan, are children something you may want in the future." He sat back, using his arm for stability as he waited for her answer.

Mimicking his posture, she drank the remaining contents of her cup before taking in a deep breath. "I don't mind them. I may... consider it in time."

"Gotta find tha' right stud, am I right there, Lady o' tha' Ice," came from the freckled, red-headed woman with a large scar flowing from her temple to her chin. She had the perfect attitude and vocabulary of a barmaid from the wharf.

Dahlia laughed at new moniker she had been given, "I don't know what you are insinuating."

"So says the Ice Queen!" the entire camp erupted in laughter, even Dahlia had to laugh at that.

"Look," the red haired woman began, "alls I'm sayin' is, if ya did manage to catch a man, you'd freeze his prick off in that ice cave o' yours!"

Dahlia shook her head, half embarrassed but still able to see the innocent humor in her words. Fen'Harel gave a small smile, looking over to the red-headed woman, laughing herself silly. "I can assure you that has yet to happen."

Dahlia wanted heave in that moment. Had she not already been drinking, her face would have obviously flashed red at this admission. The red head's jaw dropped open, still smiling at this new bit of information. However, the smile on Dahlia's face was gone and in its place was a look of horror as her eyes darted around the campfire, barely hearing the laughter and roars coming from everyone around them.

"Someone wet her glass! She looks like she needs a drink now!"

\*\*\*\*

As the hours past and everyone went to their tents, Dahlia remained by the fire, drinking water and watching the fire die. She was angry, that much was obvious, but in the same breath relieved. Keep such a secret away from an entire group of people would have been exhausting, but at the same time it was a weakness she didn't wish to admit. Not only would this possibly spread, but now this information could be weaponized. Fen'Harel gave no indication of care from the very beginning, but it still felt like a lot of weight to endure.

After sobering up a bit, she stood up and walked to her tent. Pulling back the flaps she saw Fen'Harel laying inside, hands propping up his head as he lay back watching the pitch in the tent, waiting for her.

"I figured you would be mad." Pushing himself up off the ground, he rested his arm on his knee as he watched her enter the tent and close the flaps behind her.

"I am. But that's not important right now."

It was cold in the tent, while some of the others wanted to keep the tent flaps open to let the warmth of the fire come in, Dahlia preferred the cold and privacy.

"So, what is important right now?" He was genuinely serious for once, as she began taking off her dress. The dress, while somewhat warm, was very itchy and inflexible and she was not keen on wearing it to bed. Kneeling naked before him, put a smirk on his face, but he quickly darted his eyes away, closing them to prevent temptation.

"Sleep."

She pulled back the bedroll he had laid out for them. Using his as a spread underneath them, he placed hers over, letting the plush fur lining envelope them. Curling up against him for more warmth, she used his arm as a pillow and closed her eyes.

It was quiet for a few minutes before Fen'Harel cut through the silence, "Were you really all alone? No family?"

Dahlia was a little agitated for being pulled away from sleeping, but she humored him. "In that village, yes."

"What about parents? Siblings?"

"Parents live in another town with my four brothers."

He laughed quietly to himself, "Four? And you are the oldest?"

She smiled, "Second oldest. The youngest are twins. But thank you for making me feel old."

"No wonder you are so abrasive. I bet you had to fight constantly."

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, "Yeah, I did. Okay, so I told you something about me, what about you?"

"Me? I don't think I have much to tell you." He rolled onto his side, facing her and he pulled her hair back and placed his hand on her hip. "How about telling me your real name?"

He laughed, taking her head in his hand he brought his face down towards hers. "My real name? You think I've been lying to you?"

"No, but I refuse to believe your parents decided to call you 'dread wolf,' either." She began plucking the strings to his shirt, loosening and tightening them over and over again.

"You don't know my parents! They could be very strange people."

"I have no doubts about that, but to tell you the truth," she pressed her face against his chest, closing her eyes at the bliss of warmth, "'Fen'Harel' doesn't roll off the tongue so easy during sex."

"My name is Solas." He spat out, almost immediately.

"Your parents were weird. Is that your name? Truly?" She looked up at him with a sarcastic expression.

"Yes, I was their 'pride' and joy. Apparently. But you have little room to talk. You are named after a flower, are you not?"

"Hey, my mother loves to garden. And it's a very pretty flower." She tried to puff up, trying to appear slighted at his remark, but she collapsed and began giggling when he looked at her with an arched brow.

"Solas." Rolling the word out of her mouth with ease, "I like it. I like it a lot more than Fen'Harel."

"Glad you approve." Grabbing her rump underneath the bedroll, he pulled her up and pressed her body firmly against his. Feeling the soft cotton against her body was amusing, but not as much as feeling it against the peaks on her breast. She placed the tips of her fingers against his jaw and brought his lips to hers.

"Yes, I can't wait to use it."



## Chapter 25 NSFW

Once the morning sun began to peek over the hillsides, the camp was broken down and packed up to begin the next stretch of their journey. Easing over the hills and through the valleys below, after a few hours they reached a flat land with short yellow grass dotted with small green bushes. The wind played with the meadow, kicking up blades of grass and tiny blossoms as they danced around the party. Dahlia would have thought it beautiful had she not made such a conscious effort to remain unobserved by the rest of the convoy throughout the morning. Keeping her hood on and low, she slouched forward while driving the druffalo in a pathetic effort to be mistaken for someone else.

As they followed the beaten trail through the fields everyone marveled at the snow-capped mountains in the distance. The air was dry and cold and aside from the drivers, everyone remained inside the wagons, shielded from the freezing air. Dahlia wanted to be as far away from everyone as she was capable, but Fen'Harel, or Solas as he now preferred, would not let her on her horse.

A few more hours passed and the small shrubs began to appear more often than several miles back, even getting larger the further they went. Soon they were surrounded by large pine trees in a bare forest. The trees here were spread out better than most woodland areas, and the grass from before was shorter here with regions of hard dirt and pine needles.

Stopping briefly to let the druffalo and horses rest, it was decided to tie the horses to the wagon and let the riders rest in the carts for a period. Solas climbed into the driver's seat next to Dahlia, offering to lead the wagon while she rested, which she eventually conceded.

The path they had taken offered little variance and the ways were clearly marked for those traveling to the smaller towns off the road. While the initial destination was Arlathan, there were a few who left the party at the crossroads since their journey brought them home much sooner than the rest. Dividing the caravans supplies between those who left, the remaining three wagons continued onward to their destination.

The trees grew dense the further they traveled and the woods began to look more wild and dark as the minutes passed. Solas brought their wagon ahead of the line and lead the rest into what were only known as the Wetlands.

Despite it being noon, the dense foliage in the area had prevented most of the sun's rays from reaching the forest floor. The path was lit with magic beacons which remained lit in spite of the rain pouring down upon them. Dahlia remembered these lands and dreaded having to return through them, even willing to take the longer route around just to ignore them. Solas drove the druffalo through the muddy road carefully, as though he had driven through them all his life.

Dahlia kept a thick rain slick over the both of them as he lead the wagons forward, curled up next to him in an effort to siphon the warmth from his body. After a few hours of rain the weather switched to a mild drizzle. Solas came out from under his hood when the fog thickened and lit the lanterns on the wagons so the other drivers wouldn't be lost. Dahlia was curled up as tight as she could be underneath their blanket, asleep and shivering; when she finally woke up the wagons had stopped.

Lying across the driver's seat she noticed Solas was gone and the rain had stopped. Her body felt heavy underneath the blanket, as though she were carrying three atop her. Adjusting her position, she felt a thick fur underneath her hands. Pulling the blanket back revealed her bed roll, heavy and warm; realizing that Solas had covered her somewhere along the way as she was sleeping.

Picking herself up to take a look around, she spied Solas and the other drivers talking next to a large rock by the road. Feeling the cold air filter underneath the blanket had Dahlia shivering once more, so she decided to lie back down and wait for him to return.

Tucking her head underneath the blanket warmed her body, but made the air feel stuffy underneath. A few minutes had passed when she felt a poke on her back from what may have been a very slender finger. Peering out from under her blanket, she saw Sunny smiling back at her. "You kind of look like a turtle in there."

"She'll snap like one too, so I would mind your fingers." Sunny laughed as she tried to see her face through the small opening, eventually giving up and returning to the back with the others. Dahlia remained quiet and rigid in her bundle, as though she were about to pounce.

Solas climbed back into his seat and pulled Dahlia's pipe out from underneath the seat. After putting the pipe together and taking a few breaths, he took the pipe from his lips and put it into the opening in Dahlia's blanket shell. Without saying a word, she took the pipe with her lips and curled away from him, determined to smoke through the small breach in her fort. Solas smiled, picking up the reins and moving his entourage forward.

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A few hours had passed while the fog gradually returned with force. While the lanterns adorning the wagons managed to keep them together, the pace was now slow and agonizing as the woods became blackened and dark.

Solas kept his attention on the road while Dahlia remained seated and bundled, blanket draped around her shoulders with her pipe hanging from her lips. Squinting at the dimly lit path ahead, looking for any holes in the road or animals in the fog had exhausted her. Solas watched the road through the white cloud of his breath as it appeared in the cool air. Everyone in the wagons remained quiet and kept the flaps closed to preserve the heat inside.

Offering him a hit off her pipe, he graciously took it without a word. The road remained straight for the most part, but looking to the side revealed how one wrong turn would land their wagon in the adjacent bog. It was impossible to know what time it was with the forest so dark and the canopy so high they couldn't see the top of the trees. It felt as though they had been riding all night, but they would not stop to rest in such dangerous woods.

"Tired?" She whispered as she took the pipe away from his waiting hand.

"A little. This bog is just too quiet, despite it being potentially frightening."

"I saw the skeletal remains of a deer, frozen inside the water. How's that for potentially frightening?"

Placing the reins in his right hand, he scooped her hip and pulled her closer to him, "It's very quiet. Are the others awake?"

"I heard a little snoring back there, so I think a few may have nodded off." Pulling the blanket from her lap she draped it around the both of them. Cuddling up next to him as he continued to drive on was providing a little extra warmth, "If you want, you can get in the back with the others. I found a few stones that absorb magic and produce heat at our last stop. It's very warm back there I imagine."

"I have my own heat rock, right here. Plus, you've embarrassed me enough; I don't want to talk to them right now."

“Play nice, vhenan. They just find it funny because you’re you.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?”

“You are the most abrasive healer I have ever met; your bedside manner is very strange, to say the least.”

“I thought you liked my bedside manner.” Solas smiled at her telltale baiting, acting offended but keeping a smirk on the side of her mouth where he could barely see. Wrapping his arm around her while rubbing her shoulder had her bracing against him, keeping her arms locked and her hands on his knee as he continued to rub against her underneath the blanket.

Pulling out a small satchel from underneath their seat, Dahlia dug around quietly before she found a small brown bottle. “What is that?”

Pulling the cork, a pungent aroma of oak and alcohol filled his nose, “Whisky or bourbon; it was in the bedside drawer.” She took a small swig and offered him one as well.

“Warms the body I say.” Despite the smell, the liquor had little taste at first until the eventual bite and burn as it went down his throat. Smooth and the effects were felt almost immediately.

Replacing the cork and returning the bottle to the bag she nuzzled up against him as he continued to carry on his lead.

Several minutes had passed and Dahlia barely realized she was rubbing her hand up and down his thigh as her eyes remained focused ahead. Solas however, was gradually becoming a little more attentive to her touch than she probably realized.

Keeping his voice barely above a whisper, he put his lips close the tip of her ear, “Vhenan, please stop rubbing my leg. These breeches don’t offer much room for comfort.” She stopped, but kept her hands on his thigh.

She looked down at the blanket covering them both and slowly began trailing her hand up his leg to the swell in his groin. “You’re right; these don’t offer much room for growth.” Pulling at the strings on his breeches, had him squirming for a moment, but when the cool air hit his growing member he couldn’t help but hiss until the warmth of her hands wrapped around him.

To anyone who could be watching, they appeared to be two people cuddled up underneath a blanket as they continued to ride out of these forsaken woods, but the heat on his cheeks spoke of something much different underneath that cover.

Keeping one hand on the head of his cock while the other stroked him gently, she nuzzled her head against his shoulder as he continued to try and focus on the road. Biting his tongue and keeping as quiet as possible, he snaked an arm around her shoulders and pulled on the strings of her bodice. Once the knot came undone he pushed the material aside and cupped a cold hand on her breast. Letting out a silent gasp at the icy touch, she pushed down with her hand, keeping the shaft taut as her hand continued to gently stroke the head.

“You look a little flushed.” He whispered in her ear, although he wouldn’t admit that keeping his attention on the road was becoming more difficult.

Letting go of him, she adjusted the blanket on her shoulders before pulling her dress down enough to expose her breasts to the frigid wind. “Not as much as you’re going to be in a second.” He sat back, keeping the reins in one hand he pulled the blanket up to help shield her from the outside, but before he could do anything more she ducked underneath and soon his confusion was replaced with

unbridled arousal.

Placing her hands on his shaft and cradling his sack, she raked her tongue along the head of his cock. As she continued to work him underneath the blanket he reached around and began thumbing the peaks on her breast, twisting them gently as his way of signaling to her.

Taking his head into her mouth she swirled her tongue around the tip, taking in the salty taste of his seed while enjoying the tweak of her breasts in his warmed hand. Using her saliva to help her hand glide faster on his twitching shaft, she remained silent as she bobbed her head slowly on his tip.

Solas let out an ambiguous sigh as she continued to make work of him in the open. The grind of the wheels on the wagon made enough noise to mask their activity, but it was becoming harder to keep a hold on the reins as he nearly reached his crest.

Ducking forward, he whispered to her, “Vhenan, I’m about to...” he felt her lips move further down his length, cutting off his sentence and leaving him speechless.

She knew he was getting very close and took the chance to try and take him in as deep as she could. It wasn’t much longer before she felt the strong pulsing of his cock and his hot seed hit the back of her throat. It was a little uncomfortable trying to swallow him from her current angle, but she managed once she pulled back enough.

Releasing him from her lips, she placed his softening member back into his breeches and sat back in her seat, adjusting her dress to its former shape. His head hung forward as his hand pinched the bridge of his nose, as though he were trying to alleviate a headache. She said nothing but smiled, retrieving the reins from his other hand and letting him come down from his apparent high.

“That’s for earlier.”

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It had taken a few more hours, but they managed to navigate through the bog and found themselves in a new jungle forest with incredible trees with massive roots curbing over the road, much like a bridge. Sure enough, the sun had set quite a while ago and so they built their camp as fast as they could, ate their dinner and each went to bed with a heat rock to keep their tents warm.

Everyone was happy to have a plush carpet of green grass underneath them as they camped, much better than trying to relax on the hard floor of those wagons, and many fell asleep almost instantly.

All except for one tent, pitched away from the rest on the opposite side of a grand oak tree. Inside, the sounds of rustling fabric could be heard as well as the sounds of two lustful elves.

Solas pushed the length of her dress up and over head, leaving her naked and winded beneath him on their bedroll. In as quick a moment he pulled off his tunic and collapsed upon her, biting her neck and pressing his lips to hers hungrily; devouring any words she may have wanted to say.

He was quick and impatient, little on his mind besides the need to see her a crying, blissful mess underneath his sweat-soaked body. His bites were almost feral, leaving a fleeting pain in their wake, but she wanted more across her body. He ground the bulge of his breeches against her sodden crux, returning his passion as she bucked her hips against him. Reaching between them he pulled on the strings of his pants and drew his thickened cock out, stroking it against her mound.

He hated having to pull away from her lips, but he was hardly keen on waiting much longer. Placing his cock right at her entrance, he dove in with one hard thrust. Spreading her legs around him, he bucked almost wildly into her with the intent of hitting her wall.

“Don’t stop! Don’t stop!” was all she could get out between forced breaths. Her breasts bounced hard against her chest, pushing and pulling the air from her lungs as he continued his rabid pace.

Bracing himself over her with one hand as he continued his thrust, he pried her mouth open two of his fingers, pressing them down on the soft center of her tongue. With each powerful thrust against her body, the air escaping her mouth had her panting like an animal.

“Don’t hold it in. If someone is out there, I want them to hear you. I want them to come at the thought of fucking you.” He removed his fingers from her mouth, letting her swallow and moisten her tongue once more, but still she tried to keep her moans between them.

Pulling out of her in one quick movement, he flipped her over onto her stomach and ran his hand up the back of her neck and into her hair. He dipped his head down and pressed hard kisses along her neckline until he reached the shell of her ear, nipping it with a loud growl

“I know one thing that will make you come.”

Pulling her back end in the air, she grabbed fists full of their bedroll to brace herself. He pushed her hair back over her shoulders, watching her face against the bedroll as he used his thumbs to pull her folds apart before entering her once more. Starting off a little slower than before, he quickly resumed his previous pace as he listened to her cries mount rapidly as his sack bounced against her charm with each powerful thrust.

Pushing with her hands, she was determined to meet his thrusts and wasn’t long before her final push had her crying his name.

“Solas! Solas!” She was grinding her teeth as her orgasm tore through her; she could feel her walls clamp down on him like a vise as he continued his hard rhythm. It was another minute of agonizing thrusts before he came once more and emptied himself as deep inside her as he could be. Her legs tingled and her body felt numb, but the feeling of him pumping the last of himself inside her was the last thing she remembered before blacking out.

It was perhaps a minute later when she regained herself, realizing she had been rolled onto her back and Solas was gently kissing her awake.

“You are so beautiful. There is not another person alive that I could love as much as I do you.” Her body regained its feeling and with it came the pain from her knees and the small bites on her neck.

Groaning, she began feeling each little pain on her chest, neck, and ear. He laughed and apologized for his rough behavior. “I’m sorry if I hurt you. I can heal those if you like.”

Becoming aware at how soft and warm the fur on her bedroll was she slowly began drifting off to sleep, “Leave them. What do I have to hide anymore?”

## Chapter 26

“Damn it. Damn it. Damn it!” Solas looked over from his horse to see what had her so angry. Sitting in the driver’s seat Dahlia had the reins in one hand and her pipe held firmly between her teeth as she tried to light it with her magic. Each bump the wagon took on this rocky trail had disturbed her magic flow, preventing her from lighting the bowl safely and not scorching her face off in the process. This new flood of mana she now possessed was finding cute little ways to make their appearance in her everyday life and it was starting to grate on her nerves.

Starting a fire? How about a small explosion instead? Focus healing? How about dumping all her mana into a cut and passing out above her patients.

It was taking some time to get use to the fact that she no longer had to push all her energy into making magic happen, but it was starting to feel like she had to relearn everything about control all over again.

“Do you need assistance?” he called over to her.

“No, I got this.” Speaking from the corner of her mouth she held the bowl between her thumb and middle finger while trying to light it with her index.

Another bump and she dug her finger right into the ash.

“Because you look like you need help.”

“This is your fault you know.” She tried again.

“Yeah, I can see that...”

The back of the cart erupted in laughter until a small voice could be heard quieting the others.

“If you chuckleheads aren’t doing anything important back there then light my damn pipe!” Pulling the channel from her lips she forced her arm back through the leather skins behind her. A few moments later she withdrew her hand to see the red embers pushing smoke up from the basin.

A few moments passed with quiet content before a tiny little voice could be heard behind Dahlia’s ear through the leather flaps.

“They want to know if he’s...a generous lover?”

Dahlia tied the reins to the guardrail and turned around from her seat; Solas looked on, half expecting her jump into the back and explode the whole cart in a fit of pique. But there was silence. Glancing back he could see her hindquarters propped up from her seat and her torso disappeared into the wagon. Several seconds passed and there was a roar of laughter from the women in the back. Dahlia pulled back and retrieved her reins with a smirk on her lips. While seeing her having a little fun with their charges at her expense was a delightful look, he started to worry a little about what she had told them.

The longer he entertained the thought the hotter his face became. He chuckled at the notion of being embarrassed and ran Naug’sus to the front of the line.

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Two days had passed since they left the dark bogs and soon they were traveling through familiar

lands once more. Dahlia knew these woods intimately and after an hour more along the roads they came upon a junction.

The guidepost had the most intricate design and on it there were several arrows pointing along the two paths. The most detailed arrow placed above the others simply said 'Arlathan' in beautiful script while the other arrows were simpler, listing the local villages and keeps.

Dahlia recognized her village on the post and for the first time in ages, felt genuinely homesick. However, the realization that her village was down the opposite road to Arlathan had filled her chest with dread.

As they stopped at the fork, Solas could see the mental battle play out on her face. Giving the order to take a moment to relax and stretch, he climbed up into the driver's seat while everyone took a few minutes to breath.

"Is there something troubling you?" he asked.

Pointing to one of the lower arrows, she stopped on the panel which listed her village. "That's my home."

There was a sort of panic rising in his voice, but he kept his volume down. "But we are so close to Arlathan. I thought—well, I had hoped you would come with me."

"I want to come with you, but there's something else I need to do. Back home."

They both climbed down from the carriage and ducked behind a large oak for a little privacy. She pressed her back against the tree as he stood before her, towering over her as though she were as small as a child.

"I just want to know... if you will come to me? Eventually?" He held her hands and brushed the chapped skin on her knuckles between his fingers.

"Eventually," was all she could promise him. Even though her answer hurt, he felt comfortable knowing she would keep her promise. If not, then he would be forever content to never know another woman like her.

He cradled her hands between his and brought them to his lips to kiss the delicate skin of her fingers once before bringing his lips to hers. The distress she felt was as though it were bubbling up from inside her heart, trying desperately to pour out from her eyes, but she kept her tears back and savored this last moment together.

She felt in a daze as she packed up Naug'seus for the short ride home. Changing into a pair of riding slacks she said her kind goodbyes to some of the others, especially to Sunny who cried at the thought of losing her good friend. Dahlia gave her a small kiss goodbye before trying to pry the girl from her chest.

After saying her farewells to the caravan she looked over to the cart where Solas sat, shooting her the most pitiful puppy eyes she would ever see on a grown man. She gave a small laugh and smiled at him for a brief moment; but when she could feel the tears brimming from her eyes she turned her horse and began galloping down the road.

As Naug'seus ran she felt overcome with grief. Her tears ran down her face only to be pushed back into her ears from the force of the wind. Eyes hot and face chilled to the very bone, she cried until her eyes couldn't weep anymore.

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Solas remained quiet and somber the remainder of the journey to Arlathan. By the time they came upon the outer farmlands surrounding the crystal city the day had turned to dusk.

Stopping the wagons outside a lonely homestead, he drew up his hood and knocked on the door to a fairly large home. The man who opened the door appeared very irritated to be drawn from his supper but his mood quickly changed when Solas offered him the druffalo and carts in exchange for a ride into the city.

The sun was setting when each of them piled into the back of the hay wagon, and once they passed underneath the thick iron gates into the city the stones in the road began to light up like shimmering water underneath the moonlight. Asking the farmer to take them to the temple of Fen'Harel added another hour to their ride, but at the promise of additional coin the farmer was eager to please the man and his entourage.

Approaching the gates to his temple there was plenty of excitement to be had. The different effigies to the Pantheon lined the gardens until the cart was brought to a stop before the door to the main hall.

He had walked this path hundreds of times before and would normally feel a sense of pride as he passed the golden motifs, but now the excess of it made him feel hollow. Several guards and servants gathered in the main chamber to greet their master and assist his party while he made his way up the grand stairs, forgetting his duty until one of his guards inquired as to what they should do for these followers.

“Please, let them bathe and eat. Find them beds and give them comfort. In the morning they can use the eluvians to return home.”

Turning around he climbed up the steps quietly, mulling over the thoughts in his head before the timid voice of Sunny pulled him back into reality.

“Thank you.”

He stopped for a moment, keeping his focus on the next step below before resuming his climb. He gave no answer and refused to look back.

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Stepping through the mirror felt as though his body was being pulled between two realities; each fighting to retain his presence, but the feeling was brief as he walked into the nonagonal courtyard. Each side held one mirror which could only be accessed by the Evanuris; normally this place was meant for negotiations or as a sacred place for them to meet, but as of late the spirits have come to claim this area a grounds for witness rather than debate. The sky shone white with several wisps frolicking among the flowers and trees. At the center was a large rotunda which housed nine extravagant chairs, each one designated for a member of the Pantheon.

As he approached the marble arches he saw Mythal sitting alone on a chair made from woven cherry wood and accented with rubies and plush red pillows. Her golden hair pulled up with silverite combs and wearing dark blue robes hemmed with silver lace, she sat there as though she were waiting for him all this time.

His pace became more ardent as he took on a wider stride until he stood only several feet away from her seated position. Giving him a kind smile she remained quiet, patiently waiting for his questions or his wrath.



“You told her. Why did you tell her where to find me? I know you, Mythal. I know you could see what she meant to me!”

She drew her eyes away from his, not once letting her smile falter. “I told you exactly why before. I don’t think it necessary to repeat myself if nothing new can be gained.”

“How could you have known she would be able to help me? It could have been anyone!”

She closed her eyes as though she were contemplating her response. “Fate? Or was it chance? I can’t really recall. Regardless, you are here and so is your Orb. But you are angry not because you were sent to what could have been your very death, but because she could have easily paid that price for you?”

“I tried to prevent that! You are the one who sent her after me! You lied to her!”

Mythal stood up in a flash, “You lied to me!” Solas was determined to remain in control of this argument, but his lips remained still as a silent affirmation. He knew he had lied to her, his oldest friend, but he couldn’t say he had no good reason. Relaxing his muscles, he stood up straight and attempted to conceal his anger from her, but she could see through this disguise.

Mimicking his posture she ambled up to him, determined to stare him in the eyes, but he looked away; he was firm on remaining mad. Reaching up to gently embrace his face she brought him down and placed her lips on his with a chaste kiss. His anger let up as he let her kiss sooth his rage.

“You must not lie to me. You will never do it again.” The tone in her voice became more severe and Solas knew its implications: if you lie to me again, I will strike you from this very world. He was no fool to expect their friendship to absolute.

His eyes softened as he took this subtle threat to heart, but she smiled warmly at him once more, as though this conversation never happened.

“She’ll return; so why don’t you take this time to tend to your flock, my dear wolf.”

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It was the middle of the night when she saw the lights from her village peaking across the valley. The ground was wet and cold as she led Naug’saus from atop the hill into the farmlands. The snow here had melted not long ago, but she could see the white patches remained underneath the shade of the trees. No doubt, they were due for another fall soon enough.

Once she reached the courtyard to her home, she dismounted and held the lock to the gate between her hands. The cold iron came to life as she forced her magic into the hole, forcing the tumblers aside to open the latch. There were large piles of snow and ice next to the house from where it landed when it fell from the roof. Taking Naug’saus to his stable and giving him fresh water and hay, she entered her home through the kitchen door.

Her home seemed almost foreign to her. Passing through the vestibule she looked up through one of the high windows bleeding moonlight into the room. She stood there in the cold space, watching the dust motes fall and rise in the light; it had been so long since she was alone that it felt like a dream.

Entering her room she could practically smell the dust that settled in while she was away. She changed the sheets on her bed, started the fire and pumped the water into her bathtub. Taking off the scratchy clothes she wore for the last few months, she balled them up and put them into the fire and warmed the bath almost instantly.

It may have been an hour before she came out of the water, but she was already feeling rejuvenated. Sitting before her vanity, she attempted to return to her former nightly ritual: powder her body, comb her hair, put on her night gown and curl up in her warm nest of pillows and quilts before surrendering to the fade. But even as she lay there in comfort, she was starting to feel emotional. She lay there awake for another hour before exhaustion finally claimed her.

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It sounded like rabid thumping.

Opening her eyes she quickly closed them once more when the bright sunlight burned her pupils. She did not know what time it was, but the thumping at her door told her that most people were awake now and apparently wanted inside her home.

Grabbing a robe she walked out of her room into the cold foyer to answer the maniac trying to beat her door down.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” she yelled as she threw open the door.

“Dolly!”

No sooner had she opened the door the very breath from her lungs was forced out by a tight hug from a small redheaded young woman.

“I thought you would never come back!” She swore she could feel her breast getting wetter by the second. Pulling Jun away from her she looked down to see her red hair tousled and untidy and a freckled face wet from tears and snot.

“Ew! Really Jun? Really?” she said as she looked down to see her robe looking no better than a used handkerchief.

“Everyone said they could see the smoke coming from your chimney! I ran down here as fast as I could!” Jun looked her up and down as though she were trying to figure out if it was actually Dahlia standing before her and not an imposter.

“You lost weight! And your hair! Oh my dear gods, look at your face! Where did you get that little scar on your cheek?”

“Thanks for making me feel self-conscious, Jun.” turning away and leaving the door open as a subtle invitation. Jun followed her around as she prepared for the day, asking questions from outside her bedroom door as she changed into her old clothes, following her into the kitchen as she prepared something to eat, even almost following her into the washroom.

From everything Jun had said, most people around town figured she had abandoned everyone or died, but Jun knew better. Or so she claimed. So while Dahlia was away Jun had been setting up as healer from her apartment in town and Yanos assisted the White Raven Tavern as their newest bouncer. While she feigned disinterest, Dahlia was actually eager to hear about everything Jun had done while she was gone. Sipping her tea quietly, she questioned Jun about how she treated her patients, what were some of her problems, even asking her if she had any suitors knocking on her door now that she was a little easier to access without Dahlia lurking about.

They talked for what felt like hours and before long the sun was beginning to set.

“I can’t believe we’ve been talking this whole time! The suns almost hitting the peaks on the mountains! I should probably get home soon. Will the clinic be open tomorrow? I can be here first thing in the morning!” Jun was practically jumping up and down in her seat.

“I don’t know, you tell me.” This clearly confused Jun, putting a quick end to her fits.

“From now on I’m your assistant. Because once I feel you are ready, this will be your clinic and I’m going to Arlathan.”

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

7 months later.

Awestruck was an understatement.

As she approached the golden gates of Arlathan she marveled at the size of the pillars and the beautiful silverite vines which scaled the entire length of the entrance. The height of these huge doors were daunting as she passed underneath the archway onto the busy avenue of merchants and pedestrians.

Naug'seus was clearly agitated by the congestion on the road but Dahlia kept a firm hand on his reins as she guided him along, hoping to find someone who looked as though they would be friendly enough to give her directions. Fancy carriages of modern art made their way through the crowd far easier than she, but she eventually came upon a sort of crossroads with a large fountain at the center.

Spying a young urchin boy she asked him if he knew which way to the temple of Fen'Harel. "Yes ma'am! I can take you there me'self for a copper piece!" which seemed more than a reasonable price. She gathered the boy up into her saddle and followed his directions until they came upon a section of the city which felt rather normal and less flamboyant than roads earlier.

As they approached a large metal gate along a wall of high shrubs, the boy told her to stop. "This is his temple! You just go right in and talk to the peoples and they'll help you." Letting the boy slide down from his seat, she handed him a silver coin and watched as he leapt for joy and bound off to some alleyway not far.

She would be lying if she claimed she didn't envision this very moment, but as she steered Naug'seus through the gates and into the well kept courtyard she could feel the blood practically pool in her chest. Her arms felt light and shaky, but at the same time heavy; she never thought this day would make her feel so nervous.

'Will they turn me away? What if he's not here?' There were so many questions bouncing around inside her brain she almost led Naug'seus right up the stairs and into the temple.

Dismounting, she straightened out her dress and smoothed the hood on her head, making sure the opal flower clip remained snugly fastened to her hair. Leaving the grey mount to drink from one of the beautiful fountains in the yard, she hiked up the stairs, marveling at the bright glimmer from the golden tiles as she took each step.

Immense doors leading into the main hall were so large she assumed they kept it open simply because it would be too heavy to move each day. Walking past the various guards posted on each side of the hall, nodding politely to the folks she passed on the way in; she was stopped by a man whom appeared gentle yet stately among the other men and women in the foyer.

"I welcome you to our master's temple. Are you here to donate alms to those who need?"

Dahlia was taken aback for a moment and reached into her purse, feeling around the emptiness before pulling out her last gold piece. By giving this coin to the temple she would become instantly destitute, she had no home to return to in her old village, no money for a room in the inn, not even

enough for a single loaf of bread. She had given everything she had to come here, and for a moment she panicked.

‘What if things changed? What if he’s moved on? Will I be turned away? How would I survive? What will I...’ the questions continued to flood her mind as she handed him the gold piece.

“You are a very generous woman, my dear. This one coin will feed many people and help with their pain.” He smiled as he took her hand in his. She wasn’t sure how to ask him politely or even how to address this man or his rank.

“I need to speak to S—Fen’Harel.” She stuttered. Would they even know his real name?

“While we appreciate your donation very much, I’m afraid Fen’Harel rarely meets with anyone nowadays. Forgive me.” He gave a polite bow, not once did his short, charcoal hair move with the action.

The gates which held back her desperation began to crack. “I need to speak with him. I need to see him!”

“I am truly, very sorry.” He bowed his head once more and turned to retreat further into the hall. Dahlia grabbed his robe and held him steadfast. “I am a seasoned healer.” She whispered, “If you let me meet Fen’Harel, just once, I will heal your tired and your sick. No money. Just let me meet with him.” The man had to consider this for a moment. Turning around to face her once more, he placed his hand on her fist and gently slides it from his robe.

“I will... see what I can do. Please, follow me.”

Passing by dozens of onlookers and guards, she was brought to a small antechamber with several chaise longue chairs surrounding a tranquil pool. The golden wolf statue lounging in the shallow waters was a beautiful work of art. Approaching the water’s edge she looked in to see the same golden tiles as before, carefully placed into a subtle pattern which only became noticeable when the water remained undisturbed. Recognizing this as a reflecting pool, she pulled one of the lounges closer to the water and dipped her feet in. Clearly one of the posted guards took offense to this and cleared his throat loudly as a passive signal to keep out of the water.

Feeling embarrassed she quickly withdrew her feet from the water and tucked them underneath her. Not realizing she had disrespected the temple, she sat there for a while longer, stewing in her own humiliation.

An hour had passed and she became bored looking at all the painted murals and golden tiles. After spending so long in the presence of this excess of worship she grew more tired as the time went on. It seemed like she didn’t know what to do with her hands or how to sit as she remained there, waiting for Fen’Harel to come, if he even decided to come at all.

It felt as though she had been sitting in the same spot in the same position for hours; everything from her bottom down had gone numb. Looking over to the entrance at the posted sentinels she let out a quiet sigh before lying down on the plush lounge, watching the ripples in the pool until she fell asleep.

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The feel of constraint and warmth had disturbed her slumber. She remembered the chamber with the water chilled air, but now she felt comfortable and snug; much like being surrounded by her blankets at home. But now she knew there was no home to return to, at least not in her village. She sold everything she had and gave the rest to either Jun or Yanos, said her goodbyes, told Degan and

his family to piss off, took Naug'seus and left straight for Arlathan.

Of course Jun practically held Dahlia by the waist, begging her not to leave, but Dahlia managed to pull from her grasp and promised to visit them occasionally.

Feeling the gentle bobbing of movement, she realized she was being carried away. 'They're dumping me outside!' she almost thrashed out of her hauler's grip when she heard him calmly say, "Vhenan, don't worry. I have you now."

Instant clarity rushed through her mind as she opened her eyes to see him looking down at her, absolute happiness shining through his eyes. Hooking her arms around his neck she relaxed into his hold, letting him carry her wherever he wanted to go.

"You didn't forget about me." She buried her face into the thick fur adorn on his shoulder as he took her down the hall and up the stairs.

"I wanted to see you in your dreams, but it would hurt too much. I've been reclusive since returning. But when Hesser told me that a healer demanded to see me...well..."

Reaching the landing, two posted guards opened the door for them revealing an intricately designed eluvian. Once they crossed the threshold the door closed behind them and sealed with a ward before the imageless mirror blinked to life.

Dahlia had never used an eluvian before. Holding onto him tightly she closed her eyes as he walked them both through new door into what looked like a world of his own creation.

A long hall of white spread out before them. Opening her eyes she could see tiny little wisps and spirits phasing through the walls and out again as though they were just simply passing through. The hall held many windows, each stretching high above their heads but the view was almost too painful to look; the halls of white reflected the glaring colorless sky and so she kept her face to him. "I created this place a long time ago. I won't go into the details, but I have made some alterations to my home for you."

"This is your home? You must have thought I lived in a barn by comparison." He laughed a little harder than he intended, simply overjoyed to hold her once more.

As they reached the end of the hall, doors of ivory and gold parted to reveal an incredible bed chamber. He let her down from his hold and she began to promptly look around.

The first thing she noticed was the large bed towards the back of the room, packed with pillows so white and soft they looked as though they would collapse from the slightest weight. The sheer canopy draped over the bed extended to the ceiling about twenty feet high. The brazier at the center of the room did little for light or warmth, but it was beautiful to see the pale blue fire dance. Armoires, blank canvases, armor stands, and a beautiful marble vanity were all present and offered a little color to the pristine room.

"I've never seen a bedroom like this, but I don't see a basin." Walking her to one of the doors framing the bed they walked out onto a balcony; for the first time, Dahlia could actually see the view outside. From any other point it was not clear how high they were, but as she looked down over the balcony to see the tops of the trees below she soon noticed that their bastion peered out from the side of a great mountain. It was quiet without the sounds of normal animals screaming out across the distance, but the wind quietly howled between the branches, caressing her face and dancing with the spirits.

To Dahlia, this place was so peaceful she didn't realize Solas standing behind her, appreciating the wind on his face just as she was. After few moments she realized she could hear the sound of rushing water, looking back she saw a small cascade of water pouring from an aqueduct set above a small pool. The wild blossoms and vines managed to hold and attach themselves across sides of the balcony and up the walls, helping the spire blend in well with the mountainside.

"This is beautiful; absolutely bizarre that you made all this, but beautiful." Looking back to see him leaned against the railing, she walked to him, pulling her hood down to her shoulders as she stood close enough to feel his breath on her face. "It's certainly private, even if the bath is in the open."

Craning his face to hers, he gently offered his lips to her which she claimed eagerly. As their kiss grew heated she could feel the presence of the wisps rubbing against them, moving her hair and tickling their skin. They tried to keep their kiss going, but the tickle of the spirits had them laughing.

"They won't leave me alone!" she laughed, trying to initiate their kiss once more.

"They are attracted to you, or us! They like strong emotions; they think we do this to tickle or amuse each other and they are trying to emulate that." He laughed as he gently shooed the small spirits away. "I suppose it will take some getting use to."

With one quick motion he brought her hard against his chest and continued devouring the passion from her lips. Holding her tightly he began pulling the strings from the back of her dress, letting the crush-red fabric loosen enough for him to begin stripping her to nothing but her stockings. Running her fingers deep into his hair she dug her tongue against his before pulling him back, gasping and silently pleading for more.

"Why don't we go back inside then?" Placing her hands on her shoulders she pulled the fabric down her body until she stood before him wearing nothing but a lustful gaze and one tiny ring. "I feel a chill in the air and I'm tired of being cold."

## Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I just wanted to say thanks so much for the love you've shown me while writing this as well as the patience to stick with it. This is the first part of a series so if you truly enjoyed this story and these characters I would suggest sticking around. I have new story ideas, new arcs, all that jazz plus plenty of smut. ;)

Until then I will see you all in the next story! Bye bye!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!